

THE PICK OF THE STABLE

By
Nat Gould

AUTHOR OF THE NOVELS FACING THIS PAGE

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THE PICK OF THE STABLE

CHAPTER I

A YOUNG SPORTSMAN

LESLIE WOODSDALE, having won the Newbury Autumn Cup with Golden Gate, was quite satisfied with himself and the world in general. He wanted a win, for he had not been having a very good time, and a plunge on this race pulled him round. He was not by any means a rich man, although he had a moderate yearly income which ought to have been sufficient for a bachelor. He was young—five and twenty—and had been brought up in a sporting atmosphere. His mother died a few years after he was born, and he hardly remembered her. His father was a fine cross-country rider, owned several steeplechasers, which he rode himself, and one or two flat racers, which he would liked to have ridden, but could not on account of his weight. Leslie Woodsdale, senior, won the National on The Drum, and a splendid performance it was; sheer good riding got the horse home, and he won a large sum at the remunerative odds of forty to one. The following year he came a terrible cropper at

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Valentine's Brook, and never recovered from the injuries sustained. His son, at that time sixteen, attended to him better than a nurse. For two years he was constantly with his father, wheeling him in a bath-chair round the garden to the stables, and along many beautiful country lanes. He read aloud books and the daily papers, and did all in his power to interest his father in the doings of the sporting world.

Leslie Woodsdale was eighteen when his father died. When he came of age he decided to remain at Crowhurst, which had been his home since his birth. It was not an expensive place to keep up; he loved the country and the old-fashioned house, overgrown with ivy and creepers, almost buried in a mass of green, a rare nesting-place for birds.

Splendid downs were within a mile of Crowhurst, and he had, like his father before him, the right of training on them. These downs were situated in one of the most picturesque counties, and within fifty miles of London. There were several training stables in the vicinity, and between a hundred and fifty and two hundred racers were generally exercised there. Barton Downs was a famous galloping ground; many good winners had been trained on them.

Golden Gate was not thought much of by the touts in the neighbourhood, nor did the local trainers fancy his chance, with the exception of Ben Lade, Leslie's trainer. Ben was an astute man, clever with horses, and had

handled the Crowhurst team for many years. Most people considered him more competent to train jumpers than flat racers; but, this was a mistake, as people soon found out to their cost. He strongly advised Leslie to have a plunge on Golden Gate at Newbury, and the good thing came off at ten to one.

Shortly after this event, Neil Burrowes, whom he had not seen for some years, wrote to him, inviting him to come and pay a visit at Coombe Park near Edinburgh. Neil's father and Leslie's father had been great friends, having much in common in their pursuits, both being great hunting men, and fond of all kinds of sport. Mr. Burrowes was a large ship owner, with a big business in Leith; when he died he left the bulk of his wealth to his son Neil, making at the same time ample provision for his wife and a daughter. It was a curious coincidence that Mr. Burrowes died within a month of his old friend Woodsdale.

Leslie Woodsdale had seen a good deal of Neil's father, but not so much of Neil himself. He was rather surprised when he received the invitation, for he thought Neil had forgotten him. In this he had no cause for complaint, as he had not given a thought to him for some years.

"I think," wrote Neil, "we ought to renew the acquaintance formed when we were younger. Our fathers were great friends, why should we not be so? I see your horse Golden Gate won the Newbury Autumn Cup; I

congratulate you on such an important victory, and hope you had a good win. It is our Edinburgh meeting on October the first, and I have horses entered in the Caledonian Hunt Cup and Edinburgh Gold Cup. The meeting is very enjoyable, and I think you will like it. You can also have a bit of pheasant shooting if you stay a couple of weeks, as I hope you will. My mother and sister join with me in giving you a cordial invitation."

"Coombe Park," thought Leslie, "must be a fine place. I have heard my father speak of it. Expect Neil's rich, the lucky beggar. I have never been to Edinburgh. Yes, I'll go, it will be a change; and then there's the racing. Wonder what his sister is like? Let me see, he must be a few years older than me—I should say about thirty."

When he informed Mrs. Bunting, his housekeeper, that he was going to Edinburgh, to Coombe Park, she said—

"That's Mr. Burrowes's place, isn't it?"

"Yes; his father and my father were great friends."

"They were indeed. I've seen 'em stop up till daylight playing cribbage or chess, sometimes drafts, and once or twice dominoes."

"You have a good memory, Liza," he said, laughing.

"Thank goodness, I have," she said. "There's a lot to look after here. Ben's a perpetual worry, wanting first this and then that; he keeps me going, I can tell you. I wish to goodness he'd live in a house of his own, and give me a little peace."

Ben Lade had his rooms at Crowhurst; it saved expense, and there was plenty of accommodation for him.

"I'll tell you what, Liza, Ben is rather smitten with you, I think," said Leslie, laughing.

"Go on with your nonsense. Ben Lade, indeed! I couldn't look at him after poor Bunting," she said.

"Was Joe such an excellent husband?" asked Leslie.

"That he was. He was not a handsome man, but reliable. You could trust him anywhere. He had his faults, of course. He was fond of a drop of gin, or a pint of beer; but, bless you, Mr. Leslie, all men are alike in that way," said Liza.

"Ben Lade doesn't drink much," said Leslie.

"It would be better for him if he took a drop now and again. He's grumpy, and it might liven him up; it couldn't make him more unsociable than he is," she said.

"You'll pack my things up; you know what I shall want," he said.

"When are you going?"

"On Tuesday."

"And how long shall you be away?"

"I can hardly say; perhaps a fortnight."

"Goodness gracious me! and I'm to be left with Ben Lade on my hands," she said.

Leslie laughed as he replied, "He'll not harm you, Liza; he's perfectly quiet, and you have Mary and Rose in the house, not to mention young Jim Peters."

"I don't mean it in that way ; but when Ben's left to himself his demands become most extortionate," she said.

"Shall I warn him to be less exacting?"

"No, never mind about that; it might make him worse. I think I'll be able to manage him; leastways, I'll try," she said.

Leslie went to the stables and told Ben he was going to Scotland for a fortnight.

"It'll do you good," said the trainer. "You stick pretty close to the old home. A young man like yourself ought to travel about a bit more. Have you been to Scotland before?"

"No."

"It's a fine country; where are you going to?"

"Edinburgh, to Coombe Park. Mr. Burrowes's place."

"The Mr. Burrowes who was so thick with your father?"

"His son; his father died a week or two after mine."

"So he did, now I come to think of it; they were great friends," said Ben.

"The Edinburgh races are on," said Leslie, "and he has a couple of horses running in the Cups."

"Don't drop much of the Newbury winnings over them," said Ben.

"I don't suppose I shall do that," answered Leslie, laughing.

"I'm not so sure of it; there's always a temptation to back a friend's horses."

"You'll look after things when I'm away?" said Leslie.

"Of course I will, and I'll look after the house too," said Ben.

"You had better leave that to Mrs. Bunting," said Leslie. "We don't want any friction."

"She's extravagant," said Ben; "she ought to be kept in bounds."

"I rather fancied you were attracted by her charms," said Leslie.

"Me!" exclaimed Ben. "Me attracted by a forty-year-old like her! Not me. I want something a bit smarter, not so much flesh to carry, and with an amiable temper. No wonder Joe Bunting died, it must have been a blessed release for him."

"Well, try and get on with her, at any rate," said Leslie, laughing. "She means well, I am sure, and she looks after your comfort. I never heard she kept you on short commons, or anything of that sort."

"She doesn't. She overloads me with food; that's where the trouble comes in. I'm getting quite stout; haven't you noticed it?" said Ben.

"Putting on flesh, no doubt," said Leslie, eyeing him critically.

"And she's responsible for it," growled Ben.

"She's a good cook," said Leslie.

"That's the worst of it," replied Ben. "If she didn't serve things up so tasty, I shouldn't be tempted to eat so much. Women always have been tempters, confound 'em."

"I'll give her a hint to make her dishes less appetising in future," said Leslie.

Ben looked serious, then said solemnly, "I don't think I'd go as far as that; she might not take it right, and I don't want to be poisoned yet awhile. Leave her to it; I've no wish to offend her."

CHAPTER II

A FRIENDSHIP RENEWED

COOMBE PARK was a ten-mile drive from Edinburgh, but there was a station not more than a mile away.

Neil Burrowes met his friend in Edinburgh at Waverley Station, thinking he would enjoy the drive.

Leslie came by the East Coast route, admiring the picturesque scenery, more especially after leaving Berwick, when the open sea came in view, and the salt-laden breeze blew in refreshingly at the window.

They knew each other at once, and a cordial greeting took place.

"It's a ten-mile drive to the park," said Neil, "but I thought you would prefer it to the train, after your long journey from King's Cross."

Leslie thanked him for his thoughtfulness, and said he always preferred a drive behind a good horse, to either a train or a motor.

"I expect you drive a motor?" he said.

"Yes, I find it convenient when I am in a hurry, or have an extra long journey to make; but there's nothing like sitting behind a good horse for enjoyment."

"I agree with you. This is a good goer," said Leslie.

"One of the best of my trappers; he gets over the ground quickly, and can do a long journey with ease."

They crossed Princes Street, and were soon in more open country, as they left the city behind.

Leslie admired the scenery; and Neil said, "This is very tame to the beautiful wild lochs and mountains. You must come here sometimes in the summer, and we can go for a round tour in the Highlands."

Leslie said he should be delighted; it was very good of him. What caused him to write and ask him to Coombe Park?

Neil laughed, as he said, "I am afraid I cannot claim much credit for it; my sister Beryl was looking at the paper, when she saw the account of the Newbury Cup, won by your horse Golden Gate.

"Is this Mr. Woodsdale the son of father's old friend?" she asked.

"I said it must be. When I saw the name Leslie I knew it was.

"Why don't you renew the acquaintance?" she said. 'Write and ask him here for the Cup meeting.'

"I jumped at the idea; but it was Beryl put it into my head."

"Then I must thank her for it," said Leslie.

"You'll find her a jolly girl," said Neil. "A bit of a tease, a regular romp, but she's a real little brick, and has an angelic temper. She's eight years younger than I am, twenty-two. Here we are; this is the entrance to Coombe Park."

Leslie saw a neat lodge, two finely worked iron gates wide open, a spacious drive, lined on either side by old trees which shaded the road, almost meeting overhead.

The park was beautifully wooded, and there was plenty of cover for game. Highland cattle, with rough coats, shaggy heads, and long circling horns, roamed about, gazing at them with large open eyes as they drove past.

"What a splendid place!" exclaimed Leslie.

"Yes, it's a fine home; my father loved it dearly. I try and keep everything just as he liked it. We have more pheasants than usual this year. It is a trifle early in the season, but you must have a shot at them before you return. As a rule we don't disturb them until the end of October, but they are more forward this year."

The drive was over a mile long. Midway between the entrance and the house the waters of the Firth of Forth came up to the slopes of the Park. Neil pointed the beautiful scene out.

"We often go yachting there," he said. "I am very fond of it."

"You seem to have everything a man can desire at Coombe," said Leslie.

"I confess we are fortunate. My father was a keen business man, and saved his money. I am afraid we should have had no Coombe Park had I been in charge at Leith," said Neil, smiling.

"But I see the shipping firm is still going ahead," said Leslie.

A shadow flitted across Neil's face as he said, "My father's partner, Algar Maund, has almost sole control. Of course, I have a large share in both the shipping and the business, but the management is entirely in Maund's hands. My father had great confidence in him. Maund rose from the ranks, as it were. He came into Burrowes and Company—as a matter of fact, it is a private company—when he was twenty, and after some years my father gave him a partnership. He has been with us thirty years, and has worked hard. He's not a sociable man, and I confess I don't like him ; but there's no doubt about his honesty and industry."

Leslie judged from his friend's tone that he did not approve of Maund having almost sole control over affairs ; probably there was some friction between them.

Coombe came into view. Considering the size of the park, it was not a large house, nor was it ornamental. It was built entirely of stone in modern style, and looked too new for its surroundings. Still it was imposing, if not picturesque. To Leslie the front seemed almost all

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windows ; the large porch with its massive stone pillars, stood out boldly. There was no terrace, the lower windows opening on to a spacious lawn and innumerable flower-beds ; to the left he saw a large shrubbery, and to the right he caught a glimpse of the waters of the Forth.

As they drove up the hall door was opened, and Beryl Burrowes appeared.

"That's just like her," said Neil, laughing. "She generally welcomes visitors in this free-and-easy fashion."

"I'm very glad of it," said Leslie.

Neil introduced his friend, and Beryl thought, "If he's as nice as he looks he'll do, and I shall get on with him."

"Come inside, Mr. Woodsdale ; my mother is anxious to see the son of my father's old and fast friend," said Beryl.

She had a firm yet musical voice. Leslie liked it. She was not exactly pretty, he thought, at a first glance, but he was sure there was something very attractive about her. She had a rather slim but graceful figure, and carried herself well. She was neatly dressed in a tailor-made costume of brown cloth, the skirt being short for walking, and the coat fitting her perfectly.

Mrs. Burrowes was very like her daughter, he noticed that as she rose to greet him. She was tall, rather inclined to be stout, and had a motherly look about her which, combined with her pleasant smile of welcome, at once placed him at ease.

"I knew you when you were a boy," she said, "and I am very glad to see you again, and welcome you to Coombe. Now you have found your way here, you must not neglect us. We shall always be glad to see you."

He thanked her, and expressed his pleasure at renewing an old friendship with Neil which had been neglected of late years.

He was shown to his room, which had a pleasant outlook over the water, and gave a sigh of content as he sat down at the open window for a few minutes before dressing for dinner; he felt grimy and dusty after the railway journey.

Neil put his head in at the door. "You have no occasion to dress for dinner," he said. "We never put on full uniform unless it is a special occasion, and we mean to treat you as one of the family."

"That's splendid," said Leslie. "Do you know, old chap, I hate dress suits."

"So do I," said Neil. "I wish the fashion would change; we want a shade more colouring in that sombre dress."

It was a homely dinner, such as Leslie thoroughly enjoyed. There was no lavish display, no profusion, but everything was of the best, and cooked to perfection.

Conversation was lively. Beryl was a good talker, and quickly drew Leslie out; her mother watched her with a smile on her face, and looked across at Neil.

"So you really won the Newbury Cup with Golden Gate?" she said.

"Yes, I really believe I did; at any rate I drew the stakes and the wagers," he said, smiling.

"He must be a good horse," she said.

"He is; but he's not the pick of the stable."

"You have a better than Golden Gate?" said Neil.

"Yes. He's a three-year-old. Golden Gate is four, and Benvolio three, but he can beat the Newbury Cup winner at level weights. He's by Ben Battle—Viola, and a great stayer," said Leslie.

"He's well bred. Are you having him specially prepared for any race?"

"Not yet. He has only run twice, and each time he had bad luck and only got placed; but Lade, my trainer, thinks he ought to have won on both occasions."

"Trainers are sometimes apt to be over-sanguine and make excuses," said Neil, smiling.

"They are; but Ben is not one of that sort, he's rather the other way."

"You consider Benvolio the best horse you have?" said Beryl.

"Yes."

"Then I shall make a note of him, and insist upon backing him every time he runs," said Beryl.

CHAPTER III

EDINBURGH RACES

It was the first of October. Neil said the pheasants always knew the date, and that their time of safety was past. The park looked lovely; the beautiful tints of the leaves on the huge trees heightened the charm of the scene, and Leslie thought this Scottish home of his friend a veritable paradise.

They were motoring to the racecourse, four or five miles beyond Edinburgh.

Neil had two horses entered, Stirling and Perth, the former in the Caledonian Hunt Cup, the latter in the Edinburgh Gold Cup. The horses were trained at Penrith by Amos Scarr, an old but reliable man, although he had not gone with the times, and said, "the old-fashioned way is good enough for me."

Neil Burrowes only kept five or six horses in training, but had a fair share of success with his small team. He was popular in Edinburgh, and knew the victory of one of his horses would be well received. Although not a Scotsman by parentage, he was born at Leith, and had practically lived in Scotland all his life. He was regarded by the people as one of themselves, and the great firm of Burrowes was much respected. There had never been a

strike among the employees in his father's time, but of late there had been murmurings against the retrenchment policy of Algar Maund.

Mrs. Burrowes did not go to the races ; but Beryl went, and was delighted at the prospect of seeing one of her brother's horses win.

Neil's opinion was that Perth had a better chance of winning the Gold Cup than Stirling had of annexing the Hunt Cup.

"I hope they will pull off the double," said Leslie.

The fifteen miles was soon covered by the powerful motor, and the course reached in good time.

"What a curious old place !" exclaimed Leslie, as he stood on the stand looking at the surroundings.

It certainly was a peculiar racing-ground. One side of the track ran close by the waters of the Forth, and in the centre of the ground were golf links, or what looked very much like them, he thought.

"Not much like the fashionable enclosed courses round London," said Neil, laughing ; "but it's better than it looks, and I have seen some good racing here."

"You must not pull our course to pieces," said Beryl.

"I had no intention of doing so ; but it looks so funny after our racecourses in the South," he said.

He was surprised to see what a crowd gathered, the people flocking in from all parts ; it was a bustling, animated scene, when the first race was decided.

The Hunt Cup was the third race on the card, and there were eight runners.

Cannon was favourite at evens, being regarded as a real good thing. Twinkle and the Prodigal were well backed. Stirling stood at eight to one. Signet and Carrie were nibbled at at outside prices.

Neil Burrowes' colours were tartan jacket, white cap, and Sam Main, the jockey, wore a new jacket and cap, which looked conspicuous in the bright sunlight.

Stirling looked fit, and had a nice racing weight. Leslie was much impressed with the horse, and said to Neil—

"I shall put fifty on him ; he ought to run well. They are not a very tip-top lot."

"Please yourself, but the race looks fairly good for Cannon."

"You will back your horse?" asked Leslie.

"Yes, for a pony."

"And I must have five pounds on," said Beryl.

"You can stand in with me," said Neil.

"No, thanks ; I prefer to have my own money on. Get me forty pounds to five, if you can, Mr. Woodsdale."

Leslie accepted the commission, obtaining the odds she asked for ; he also took four hundred to fifty himself from a bookmaker Neil introduced him to.

"I'll take half of that back," said the layer, as Leslie walked away.

The distance was a mile and a half. The lightly weighted Carrie dashed off with the lead.

Sam Main had received instructions not to hurry his mount for the first six furlongs, unless something went away with a long lead and kept in front.

Carrie made the pace hot, and as she did not come back to the field, Main sent Stirling along in pursuit. Cannon's jockey followed suit, and at the end of a mile the race commenced in earnest.

"Half a mile to go," said Leslie. "They are making their efforts too soon."

"It is all in favour of Stirling; he's a grand finisher," said Neil.

As they entered the run for home, Carrie dropped back, and Twinkle took up the running, followed by Signet, Cannon, Stirling, and Prodigal. It was a pretty race. The blue jacket of the favourite's jockey showed prominently. Cannon looked very like a winner. There was some cheering, but it was checked when Signet and Stirling were seen to be pressing him hard.

"Splendid race," said Leslie.

"It is!" said Beryl. "Will Stirling win?"

"He's got a fine chance," said her brother.

For the last furlong it was a desperate race between Cannon, Signet, and Stirling. They were neck and neck, each striving for the mastery; there was no shirking, the riders were hard at it.

Beryl became excited; she shouted, "Stirling, Stirling!" and Neil laughed as he said—

"Keep cool, Sis; he hasn't won yet."

"But he will, I know he will. He's level with Cannon; see, he's got his head in front. Isn't it glorious!" she exclaimed.

The crowd were roused, and a hurricane of cheers broke forth from the many thousands.

The tartan jacket was in front, gained a slight advantage, and was recognized by most of those present as belonging to Neil Burrowes, of the popular Leith firm.

Cannon, however, was not beaten, and putting in a splendid run in the last fifty yards, drew level again with Stirling. The excitement redoubled, and the partisans of the two horses shouted their names vigorously.

The finish was magnificent, heads level, jockeys riding all they knew, the pair seemed locked together, stride for stride. The winning-post was only a few yards away, and Beryl watched the pair with intense interest. She could not shout, the strain was too great. At last, the pair flashed past the post, and no one but the judge could tell which had won.

The numbers went up; it was a dead heat between Cannon and Stirling, with Signet third.

"That's better than being second," said Neil. "I am satisfied; the Gold Cup looks a pretty good thing for Perth after this; he's better than Stirling, and it's the same distance."

"Shall you divide?" asked Leslie.

"If I can," said Neil, who went down to the weighing-room.

In a short time the cry "All right" came, and the announcement that the owners agreed to divide.

They saw Amos Scarr again before leaving the course, and he said Perth ought certainly to win the Gold Cup after Stirling's performance.

Next day they again motored from Coombe to the course. This time there were no liberal odds on offer; Perth, after his stable companion's splendid performance against Cannon, was served up as hot favourite; there were seven runners, and odds of six to four on were asked for about Neil's horse.

"I don't care much about laying odds on as a rule," said Leslie, "but I must have a wager."

"So must I," said Beryl; "put me twelve pounds to eight on, please;" and again Leslie was entrusted with the commission.

Perth proved a better favourite to back than Cannon. As they came round the bend into the straight the tartan jacket shot to the front. Perth was never caught; he won easily by five lengths, amid tremendous cheering, which was renewed again and again as Neil smilingly bowed his acknowledgments.

They were very merry at Coombe that night, although Mrs. Burrowes did not seem in very good spirits. Beryl was the first to notice it, but made no remark until dinner was over, when she drew her mother aside and said—

"Don't you feel well, mother dear? You were so quiet at dinner; have you one of those nasty headaches?"

"No, I am quite well," she said. "I have had a visitor to-day."

"Ah," said Beryl, meaningly, "I know—Mr. Maund; he always upsets you. Why can't the man keep away? What did he say, anything particularly nasty?"

"The usual thing. Business was not so good as it was, trade dull, shipping falling off; freights and passenger fares lower, competition keener, prospects of a labour struggle, the men are in a state bordering on outbreak, and so on," said Mrs. Burrowes.

"That's quite sufficient; it fairly takes my breath away," said Beryl. "What does he want? Why did he come to you?"

"He wishes me to ask Neil to speak to the men. He grudgingly said they took more notice of him than any one. If Neil does not talk them over, he says there is sure to be a strike, and with the amount of work on hand at the factories it will be a very serious thing," she said.

"Neil will speak to them," said Beryl.

"I hope so. We must try and persuade him," she answered.

CHAPTER IV

STRIKE PROSPECTS

LESLIE was out in the grounds early next morning, and in a short time saw Neil coming towards him, evidently in deep thought, for he had not seen him.

"Morning meditations. I hope they are pleasant," said Leslie, laughing.

Neil looked up with a start. Leslie judged by his face something was wrong.

"Can't say they are," answered Neil. "I had a talk with my mother last night; she sent for me, and I went to her room. Yesterday Algar Maund called; he says business is bad, that the men threaten to strike, and a lot more complaints. He wants me to speak to the men. Confound him, I wish he'd do his own nasty work. I have never been able to understand why my father gave him such a prominent position in the firm. Maund must have influenced him somehow. He's rather a strange fellow, a bit of the hypnotist about him, a peculiar snaky look in his eyes. Beryl says he always makes her feel creepy and afraid of him when he gazes at her with his piercing black eyes."

"You will speak to the men, I suppose?" said Leslie.

"I don't know. I have not made up my mind. In the

first place, I am inclined to agree with them. I do not think trade is sufficiently bad to warrant a reduction in wages," said Neil.

"Is it a large reduction?"

"It amounts to about a shilling a week all round, some a trifle more, some less."

"They are well paid."

"Yes."

"Mr. Maund no doubt has good reasons for making a reduction?"

"From his point of view he may have?"

"I think the workmen in these days have too much of their own way," said Leslie.

"That may be, but we have advanced in knowledge of late years, and the working-men will not put up with customs that were in vogue half a century back."

Leslie looked at Neil curiously. He thought it strange a man in his position should be on the side of the men.

"Of course you know best," he said; "but I confess I am rather surprised at the view you take."

"It's my father's view—he always treated the men well. The root of the trouble is that they don't like Algar Maund. I believe some of them almost hate him; at any rate, he is very unpopular. They say men who rise from the ranks are the greatest tyrants," said Neil.

"Come in to breakfast," said Beryl's cheerful voice. "I have been looking for you everywhere. Mother is in

bed; she has a headache. Mr. Maund always upsets her; he's a nuisance."

Leslie thought how fresh and charming she was; he hoped he would never be in her black books.

At breakfast Neil broached the subject again. "I was talking it over with Leslie when you called us," he said.

"And what did Mr. Woodsdale say?" she asked.

"He said he supposed I would speak to the men."

"Good," said Beryl. "I hope you will;" and she thanked Leslie with a bright look.

"What does mother say?" asked Neil.

"She hopes you will speak to them," said Beryl.

"Oh, very well, I'll do it," he said sharply. "You'll have to come and support me," he added, turning to Leslie.

"I'll come, with pleasure; but I don't see of what use I can be. I think your sister at your side would have more influence."

"I'll come too," said Beryl. "I'd like to see the fun."

"I must see Maund first. I'll telephone to him to come here this afternoon," said Neil.

"For goodness' sake don't ask him to dinner!" exclaimed Beryl.

"I am afraid I must; it would not be polite to do otherwise. He may not stay."

"I hope he won't. Do you know, Mr. Woodsdale,

he gives me the shivers; he's such an uncanny-looking man," she said.

Neil had letters to write, and Beryl, putting on her hat, asked Leslie to go for a short walk.

He was delighted. Evidently she did not consider him "creepy" or "uncanny."

Beryl blew her whistle, and a couple of spaniels came bounding up.

"Nice dogs," said Leslie.

"Yes; very well bred. An old friend of Neil's gave them to me."

Leslie wondered who the friend was.

It was a glorious walk by the waters of the Forth; Leslie enjoyed it thoroughly.

They chatted freely, without any restraint, on all kinds of topics.

"I suppose you come to London occasionally?" said Leslie.

"Not often. You see, I do not like to leave mother, and she dreads the long railway journey. Sometimes her sister comes to stay with us—my Aunt Fanny; then I can go away in peace with my brother. I am very fond of London, but I should not care to live there."

"I should think not," he said, "when you have Coombe."

"Do you like our home?"

"I never saw a place I liked half so well; it is perfect," he said.

"Hardly that; but it is a dear old place. I should be sorry to leave it."

"Leave it!" he exclaimed. "You will never do that."

She was silent for a few moments; then, acting on a sudden impulse, she said—

"I distrust Algar Maund. He has almost sole control over everything, and he does not like Neil. Why, I do not know. At times I fancy there is something between them, that they have had a serious difference. Maund is not a man to forgive or forget easily; he could be a dangerous enemy. But why should I trouble you with my surmises?"

"I am proud you have confidence in me," said Leslie. "May I suggest that perhaps you are taking an exaggerated view of the situation?"

"I hope I am; but I don't think so. Will you tell me quite candidly what you think of Algar Maund when you meet him?"

"With pleasure; but I am afraid I am not much of a judge of character."

"Some people who profess to be no judges of character are sometimes, unconsciously, the best," said Beryl.

They returned to the house. Beryl went to see her mother. Leslie sat down on a garden-seat, the two spaniels at his feet, looking up into his face with liquid eyes, their long ears drooping gracefully; he patted them and thought of their mistress.

"I wonder who gave you to her?" he muttered.

Beryl was a charming girl, one of the nicest girls he had ever met; moreover, she was sensible, not at all affected, perfectly natural and open. He felt proud she had to a certain extent deemed him worthy of her confidence. Decidedly Beryl was nice, he would not forget her easily. Then he wondered what sort of a man Algar Maund was. Neil trusted him in business affairs evidently, from what he had said. Beryl, he fancied, had no faith in the man. He determined to take stock of him and judge for himself.

The opportunity came after dinner, when Neil, Leslie, and Mr. Maund were left alone. At dinner he saw in Algar Maund merely an ordinary, astute, business man, silent, reserved, somewhat ill at ease in his surroundings. It was easy to tell he had risen from a lower stratum than the Burrowes. Still, Maund knew how to behave, and he was exceedingly polite to Beryl, who once or twice administered a rather severe snub to him, and appeared to take pleasure in combating his views. When she did so, Maund had smiled in rather an exasperating, self-possessed way, as though he felt sure of his ground, and of having the upper hand.

They sat in the smoke-room, beyond the billiard-room, and Neil said—

"You think it imperative I should speak to the men?"

"Yes."

"Why cannot you do so?"

"They will not listen to me," said Maund, bitterly. "They do not know what I have done for them in the past. I have supported them through thick and thin, and now, when it is absolutely necessary, owing to the depression in trade, to make a slight reduction in their wages; they regard me as little less than a robber."

"Is it necessary to reduce wages at this particular moment. We shall soon have the cold weather here; why not wait until the spring?" said Neil.

"No, this is the time; it is the fear of what the winter may bring that will induce them to yield," he said.

"I don't like to look at it in that way," said Neil, sharply. "It doesn't seem to me to be playing the game fairly."

"If we don't take advantage of them they will of us, if they have half a chance," said Maund.

"Do you think my influence over them is sufficient to cause them to accept a reduction?" asked Neil.

"Your name is sufficient," said Maund, a slight tone of sarcasm in his voice.

"I presume you mean it is because I bear my father's name that my influence is greater than your own," said Neil.

"That is so. If you visited Leith more frequently the influence on your own account would be much greater," said Maund.

"Perhaps you are right; but my father had such

confidence in you that I can afford to leave matters in your hands with an assurance that our interests will be safeguarded," Neil said.

"You can certainly do that," was the reply.

Before Algar Maund left, Neil promised to address the men the following day before the dinner hour.

"My sister wishes to accompany me, also Mr. Woodsdale," he said.

Algar Maund shot a sharp penetrating glance from his keen black eyes at Leslie, and said slowly—

"Mr. Woodsdale ; yes, he can come if you wish ; but perhaps it would be safer to leave Miss Burrowes at home."

"You don't mean to suggest my sister would be in any danger from the men ; that they might be violent ?" said Neil, in some surprise.

"There is no telling what may happen ; I never trust masses of men who imagine they have a grievance. I think your sister would be better advised if she remained at home," said Maund.

"I'll speak to her about it ; but don't be surprised to see her with us," said Neil.

CHAPTER V

NEIL IS WARNED

IN the large yard of Burrowes and Company's works some hundreds of men assembled. There were sullen looks on the majority of faces, determined gestures as they talked in groups, an attitude of defiance pervaded the whole mass. They had been informed that Neil Burrowes would address them on the subject of a reduction of wages. Many of these men had been at the races when Neil's horse won the Gold Cup, and although they could not afford to back Perth at the limited price, they cheered the victory of the Tartan jacket heartily.

Neil was well known to many of them by sight, but he seldom mixed with them at the works. They respected him because he was his father's son.

There was a low murmur, like an angry growl, as Algar Maund walked across the yard. The rumble gradually swelled into a storm of hoots and groans. Coarse epithets were hurled at him. Maund went on his way unheeding; he despised them. He knew his life was in danger at times; but he was no coward, and accepted all risks calmly.

It was from a lower balcony, in front of one of the windows, Neil was to address them. He arrived in

good time, with Leslie and Beryl. When he saw her Maund frowned, and said it was very unwise of her to come.

"There is no danger, with such an escort as my brother and Mr. Woodsdale," she said.

"You have been ill advised," he answered. "This is no place for girls."

The remark roused her. "You will find I am not a girl. If the occasion arises, I shall prove myself a woman, and a match for most men," she said.

He smiled—the same self-confident smile Leslie had noticed at Coombe.

"Everything is ready," said Maund; "they are waiting for you. Mind and be firm; make no promises. Tell them the reduction is absolutely necessary, or the works must be shut down."

"If I am to speak to them, I must use my own discretion," said Neil.

"You don't mean to give in to them!" exclaimed Maund. "That would weaken my authority; I should have no control over them; it would be disastrous."

"There may be some way of compromising," said Neil. "Have they asked for a conference?"

"Yes."

"And you declined to meet their representatives?"

"I did; it can do no good."

"There I differ from you; I think it would smooth matters over," said Neil. "I shall certainly agree to a

conference, if they suggest it, as a way to solve the difficulty."

There was a clamour outside; the men were becoming impatient.

"I advise you not to yield an inch," said Maund.

"If I cannot accept a proposal for a meeting, I must decline to address them," said Neil, firmly.

The noise increased. Algar Maund had a black, angry look on his face; he gave in with an ill grace, and said—

"Have your own way in this matter; I assure you it is wrong, and will do no good."

"We can but try it," said Neil, as he stepped through the window on to the balcony, followed by Beryl and Leslie. Algar Maund stood in the background.

A hearty cheer greeted Neil, who smiled at the crowd before him, and as Beryl stepped to his side it was renewed again and again. With an impulsive gesture she waved her hand, and there was another cheer.

Maund scowled as he thought of the very different reception that greeted him as he crossed the yard half an hour before.

Neil was not a particularly fluent speaker, but he had plenty of common sense, and knew his men. His voice rang clear, and was heard by all.

He commenced by alluding to his father, and how all the men had always been treated by the firm.

"You have had no cause to grumble in years gone by,"

he said. "We have had no strikes; you have been well paid. Trade is depressed, and it is absolutely necessary some reduction should be made. It will not be permanent; the old scale will be adhered to as soon as a change for the better takes place. I will promise you that."

"There's heaps of work on hand," said a man in the crowd; and the remark was greeted with cheers.

"I am glad to hear it," said Neil; "it shows you will not lack for employment as thousands of men do, and you ought to be thankful. You must, however, remember that prices are not what they were, and raw material is dearer—that is where the shoe pinches."

As he warmed to his work, he spoke with a crude eloquence that touched the men. He harped on their best feelings, loyalty to the old firm, to the name he bore, to the veneration in which his father's name was still held.

"Accept this modest reduction and you will find it will pay you in the end. Strike, and what do you lose? Many thousands on wages. Your wives and children will suffer, your funds will be impoverished, and for what? because you decline to accept a fair reduction, which has become absolutely necessary to continue work at a profit."

Maund smiled at this statement.

When he ceased speaking there was a dead silence, then one of the leading men came forward and spoke.

He disclaimed having any grievance against Neil Burrowes; they all had the greatest respect for the family.

"What we object to is being treated like dogs by Algar Maund."

A roar of applause greeted this statement.

"You don't know him, sir, as well as we do; but you'll find him out some day, take our word for it. I speak for all my mates. Take my advice, respectfully given, sir, and come down to the works oftener and see how things are going; you'll soon find out where there's a screw loose."

Then he made a bold statement which had evidently been agreed to beforehand.

"Here's our offer, Mr. Burrowes. If Algar Maund will resign as manager, we will return to work at the reduced rate of pay offered, until trade improves."

Another tremendous roar greeted this announcement—"Resign! Resign!" was shouted on all sides.

Algar Maund still had the peculiar smile on his face.

"I am afraid I cannot accede to your request, and ask Mr. Maund to resign," said Neil, in a clear voice. "He was appointed by my father, who had every confidence in him, and I cannot make any move in that direction."

"You'll be sorry in the end."

"He's feathering his nest."

"He's a bully and a coward."

"Turn him out, and we'll be satisfied."

These ejaculations came from various parts of the yard.

"Is there no other way out of the difficulty. What about a conference with your leaders?" said Neil.

"He's refused it," said James Hart, the spokesman for the men.

"Will you let the matter stand over for a month, and hold a conference with the directors? In the mean time your wages will not be reduced," said Neil.

A cheer greeted this proposal. Maund clenched his hands, muttering—

"The young fool! He's given the thing away; but I'll pay them out for it. They'll rue the day they insulted me. Treat them like dogs, do I? At any rate, I'll let them know who's master."

"I'll accept that on behalf of the men," said Hart. "If Mr. Maund had agreed to it before there would have been none of this bother."

"Then it is settled," said Neil. "I am very glad; I hope there will be an amicable arrangement."

There were steps leading from the balcony, and Neil went into the yard to speak to James Hart.

The men thronged round them, greeting Neil in a bluff, hearty fashion, which showed they had no animosity against him.

Hart drew him on one side, and said in a low voice,

"I do not wish to alarm you, Mr. Burrowes, but take my advice, and keep your eyes on Algar Maund, or get some sharp man to do it. You seldom come here, and don't know much about the inner workings of the business ; it is all in one man's hands, and they are not clean. I am speaking in confidence."

The man's manner impressed Neil. Hart had been in their employ since he was a lad, and had always been found on the side of peace.

"You are making a serious statement, Hart," said Neil.

"In confidence."

"Yes ; I shall say nothing."

"It is true ; I'll swear it. There's a lot of underhand work going on, and Maund is at the bottom of it."

"How do you know this?" asked Neil.

"I have not been here over forty years for nothing. There's tons of stuff go out of here, the proceeds of which go into Maund's pockets."

"I can't believe that," said Neil, sharply. "You are prejudiced ; you must be mistaken."

"I don't think so, sir ; anyway, I have warned you. My opinion is——" He hesitated.

"Tell me your opinion," said Neil.

"Algar Maund is playing a deep game. He is trying to get the whole of the business into his hands, and he'll manage it somehow, if he's not checked," said Hart.

"I will think over what you have said," answered

Neil; "but I cannot believe it at present, although I am sure you think you are acting in my interests."

"That is why I have spoken, sir; and also in the interests of the men, and myself," said Hart.

CHAPTER VI

A GALLOP FROM END TO END

AFTER a pleasant stay at Coombe for over a fortnight Leslie Woodsdale returned to Crowhurst, much to the delight of Mrs. Bunting. He was loath to leave the charming place, but felt he ought to be at home again. During the time he had been at Coombe his interest in Beryl had increased daily; the more he saw of her, the more she attracted him.

Neil had been down to Leith frequently since the mass meeting of the men, and Leslie had been much alone with Beryl. They shot together over the well-stocked preserves, and went long walks in the neighbourhood. He fancied Neil was troubled about something, but did not ask for his confidence.

Beryl, too, felt Leslie's departure very much. He was such good company, a jolly fellow, and she liked him immensely. She hoped it would not be long before they met again.

Everything had gone on well at Crowhurst during his

absence. Mrs. Bunting made the usual complaints about the exacting nature of Ben Lade, and the trainer retorted by saying she was "a cantankerous old cat." Leslie laughed, and said they appeared none the worse for his absence. It was a pleasure for him to look round the horses again. They were all in good health, and Lade was anxious to put Benvolio to the test before the autumn was out.

"I don't advise you to run him again this year," he said; "but it will be just as well to see how he shapes, so that I can have him fit by the spring."

"Golden Gate, Thrush, and The Lamb are all entered at Newmarket Cambridgeshire Meeting," said Leslie. "If they are in form we can soon put Benvolio to the test."

On the first day of the meeting Golden Gate won the Limekiln Stakes, over a mile and a quarter, carrying eight stone twelve pounds, and beating four good horses in a canter. This was satisfactory, at any rate; there was no doubt about his form. On the Wednesday Thrush ran second in an All Aged Selling Plate, over five furlongs. On the following day The Lamb landed the Ditch Mile Welter, in which he was leniently handicapped, after a terrific race with Bully Boy and Snooker. Thrush was pulled out again on the last day for the Queensberry Handicap, five furlongs; and his race in the All Aged Selling Plate having done him a lot of good, he managed to scramble home from a big field by a neck. This was

uncommonly good luck for Leslie, who had three useful wins—one with each horse, a remarkable performance, much commented upon.

“We know they are all in form,” said Ben. “Now is the time to put Benvolio through the mill.”

The week after the Newmarket meeting this was done. Benvolio was considered the pick of the stable, was a great favourite of Leslie's, who hoped to land a big race with him. He was a splendid bay, with one white hind foot, and stood considerably over sixteen hands. His make and shape were well-nigh perfect, and no owner could have wished to view a better-looking racer.

Ben Lade weighted him up to the top of his form for the trial. Benvolio was to carry nine stone, Golden Gate a stone less, Thrush seven stone six pounds, and The Lamb seven stone six pounds.

Thrush, a good sprinter over five furlongs, was to bring them along from the start, Golden Gate was to go the whole distance, and The Lamb to jump in on the last five furlongs of the mile and a half. It was an anxious time for Leslie, for he had set all his hopes on Benvolio for the spring of the coming year.

The trial took place early, on Barton Downs, but not before the watchers were out, eager to see all that took place.

“There's a crowd of 'em,” said Ben, growling. “One thing, they don't know the weight.”

"Never mind them," said Leslie; "they'll forget all about the gallop in a few months."

"The beggars never forget anything," said Ben. "They make a note of it, you bet."

Stable lads were up. Leslie had no claim on any jockey's services; he could not very well afford it. They were all reliable and very fair riders, however, and they knew the horses well.

Golden Gate and Benvolio went off together, Thrush leading them a merry dance for five furlongs, when he was done with and fell back. Golden Gate then went to the front, but Benvolio kept close on his track. Five furlongs from home The Lamb jumped in, and the pace increased.

Eager eyes were watching what was certainly a splendid gallop from end to end. Two furlongs from the finish Benvolio drew level with Golden Gate, the pair running neck and neck until the latter fell back. The Lamb was still in front.

The lad on Benvolio had been told to do all he knew to win, and he carried out his instructions admirably. It was a great finish, and Benvolio just got up and won.

"A grand performance," said Leslie, excitedly. "He's good enough for anything."

"He'll do," said Ben, with a quiet smile. "If he's in this form in the spring, we shall make things lively."

That Benvolio's gallop had impressed all who saw it was evident from the account in the sporting papers.

"Benvolio finished in splendid style," wrote one correspondent; "but I am puzzled to know what he is going for. So far as I know, he has no engagement this autumn. If he is kept for next spring he will be dangerous, and I have made a note of him for future use. He is a horse worth watching, and will certainly pay to follow."

"There! what did I tell you?" said Ben, throwing down the paper. "I call it scandalous. It ought not to be allowed; it may influence the handicapper."

Leslie laughed, as he said, "I don't think it matters much; you see, ours is not a crack stable."

"But there's a crack in it. Take my word for it, Benvolio's a real smasher. I know two races will just suit him: the City and Suburban, and the Jubilee Stakes at Kempton Park."

"He can't win both," said Leslie.

"It all depends on the weight he gets. If he's well in he'll carry a penalty all right," said the trainer.

"Shall we train him with a view to those races?"

"Yes. If he is the horse he proved himself to be in that gallop, next April he'll make short weight of the opposition at Epsom," said Ben.

"He has always wintered well," said Leslie.

"And, thank goodness, we can generally keep 'em moving on Barton Downs, no matter what the weather may be; there's all sorts of galloping ground."

"Look here, Neil!" exclaimed Beryl, handing him

The Sportsman; "read that." And she pointed to a paragraph.

"By Jove! that must have been a good trial," said Neil.

"Benvolio is the pick of the stable at Crowhurst, and I made a note of him. I shall have a good bit on when he runs," said Beryl.

"For the sake of the horse or his owner?" said Neil, smiling.

"The horse, of course. How silly you are!" she said.

"I rather fancied you liked my young friend Leslie."

"So I do," said Beryl. "I like him very much indeed."

"He's a good sort," said Neil. "Do you know, Sis, I have half a mind to run up to London and go on to Crowhurst. I want a bit of a change."

Beryl looked at him anxiously. Neil had been a good deal worried of late, ever since he had taken to going regularly three or four times a week to the works at Leith. He looked paler than usual, harassed, not his old jolly self at all. Her mother had noticed it too.

"Neil, will you tell me something?" she asked quietly.

"What is it?"

"Is there anything wrong at the works? You look troubled—have done ever since that beastly meeting. Is it this conference worries you? When is it to be held?"

"To-morrow. When that is fixed up I shall go and see Leslie," he said.

"Is it the conference bothers you?" she asked

"Not much. I am anxious. I shall be glad when it is over. I fear the men will not give way, and Maund is as obstinate as a mule, confound him," he answered.

"There is nothing else but the conference?"

He hesitated, then said, "No; at least, I think not. I am not quite sure."

"Of what?"

"Oh, never mind. You would not quite understand it, and I think it better not to say anything at present."

"Is it connected with Mr. Maund's management?" she persisted.

"Please don't ask me any more questions. As far as I know, Maund has done all he can in his position as managing director," said Neil.

Beryl told her mother Neil intended paying Mr. Woodsdale a visit; and she said—

"It will do him good. He wants a change. I think business matters have worried him a good deal of late."

"He says he is anxious about the conference to-morrow; but I am sure there is something more than that," said Beryl.

"Have you any idea what it is?" asked her mother.

"No; he did not tell me. I wonder if it has anything to do with Algar Maund?" said Beryl.

CHAPTER VII

ABOUT A WILL

THE conference was held, and lasted a considerable time. It was finally decided, after a heated debate, that no reduction should take place for three months ; but at the end of that period, if trade had not improved, wages would be lowered as proposed by Mr. Maund.

It was an unsatisfactory settlement. So said Maund, who had no faith in the men, and prophesied that at the end of three months they would still be as obstinate as ever, and decline to accept any reduction.

Neil was glad when it was over, and next day he went to London and on to Crowhurst.

Everything interested him here. He was delighted with all he saw, and the horses he thought above the average.

Benvolio took his fancy at once, when led out of his box for inspection and walked round.

"He's a beautiful horse," said Neil. "I don't recollect having seen a better-looking animal. What a grand trial that was, according to the paper!"

"And the writer did not know the weight, or he would have made much stronger comments," said Leslie, smiling. He then gave his friend a full account of the gallop, at which Neil was surprised,

"You must have a real good thing in Benvolio," he said. "What are you going to do with him?"

"Keep him till next spring," said Leslie.

"Not going to run him now he is fit?" said Neil, surprised.

"No. Lade thinks it better not. He is quite sure the horse will retain his form, and be even better in the spring."

Leslie, when Neil had been with him a few days, thought he looked depressed, and as if he had some trouble on his mind. One evening he ventured to speak about it, and his sympathetic attitude drew Neil out of his reserve.

"I don't think I shall be doing wrong in taking you into my confidence, although I have said nothing to my mother or Beryl," said Neil. "I know you will keep what I tell you to yourself."

"Certainly I will," said Leslie.

"I have told you about the result of the conference," said Neil. "Maund does not trust the men. He says they will be as obstinate at the end of three months as they are now."

"I hardly think that," said Leslie; "but of course I do not know how they act. I merely judge from appearances. They seemed a decent lot of fellows, and bore you no ill-will."

"I think I could manage them; it is Maund they do not like," said Neil.

"I should not let it worry me," said Leslie. "Three

months is a respite, and many things may happen before then."

"That is not all; it is not the result of what may happen in three months troubles me; it is something far more serious."

"What is it?" asked Leslie.

"I fancy Maund has some hold upon the business that I know nothing about. I cannot fathom what it is at present. So far as I am aware, my father was a fairly rich man; he left a considerable amount of ready money, quite sufficient for us all to live on comfortably, but not to keep up Coombe, without our interest in the works," began Neil.

"Your interest in the works is permanent, of course," said Leslie.

"My father's will was peculiar," said Neil. "I have studied it again closely, and noticed one thing that I overlooked, or did not understand. It is a clause in which Algar Maund is given power, in case certain contingencies arise, to take over a large number of additional shares in the business. These contingencies are not mentioned, but it is stated that they are in the possession of Maund, who is not to disclose them unless necessity should arise. It is all very vague to me; I cannot make it out. I know at one time my father lost large sums of money in South African and Australian mines, Stock Exchange speculations, and raised money on the Coombe estate. I understood, however, that had all been cleared off before

he died. What puzzles me is Maund's attitude towards us; he always looks like the man in possession when he visits Coombe; sometimes I wonder if he has any hold upon the property."

"Your father would have told you had such been the case—at any rate, at the time of his death you would have discovered if the estate had any incumbrance on it," said Leslie.

"There was none disclosed, and no claim has been made for interest or anything else, so naturally one would conclude it is free, but I sometimes have doubts. My father was an obstinate man in some ways; he was apt to trust people to a greater extent than was desirable. His belief in the honesty and integrity of Algar Maund was unbounded—it may even be called extravagant, quixotic.

"Maund keeps his affairs to himself; he never discloses anything connected with his investments. I am sure he is a wealthy man, because I have heard from undeniable sources that such is the case. What troubles me is this, Maund may have some claim on the estate of which I am not aware. The reason I have ground for so thinking is that my father should have invested in what are called gilt-edged securities a sufficient amount of capital to allow us to live in comfort, independently of the business; but, as I said before, the income from this source would not be sufficient to keep up Coombe."

Leslie looked serious; he said, "Do you really mean

that Maund may have a heavy mortgage on Coombe estate, and that you know nothing about it?"

"Yes, that is the trouble. You see, my father's will hints at 'certain contingencies.' The will was made many years, eight or nine, before he died. It was about that time he lost such large sums of money. It occurs to me that Maund may have advanced him a large amount, and that Coombe, or part of it, was the security.

"No doubt when the will was made the 'certain contingencies' would, my father anticipated, be done away with before he died, say, in a few years. The end came suddenly; he was in a semi-unconscious state for a long time, and incapable of thinking or understanding anything. He may have intended to alter the will, or explain the 'contingencies.' His trust in Maund was so absolute that I fear he may have given him a document, which in his hands might become a powerful weapon if he cared to use it."

Leslie listened attentively; it was a strange story. He could not bring himself to believe that Neil's father would have allowed his faith in Maund to carry him so far.

"I think if your father had given Maund any hold upon Coombe, he would have told you," said Leslie.

"I doubt it," said Neil. "My father was in many respects a close man, although most kind and considerate to us. It was a bad day for him when he took Maund into partnership; I am beginning to find that out. For

many years I trusted him, as my father did, but one by one doubts have arisen which have been confirmed. He has some deep game to play, I feel sure, and I fancy James Hart's opinion of him may be correct."

"If he has a claim on Coombe, he ought to tell you," said Leslie.

"That is just what he would not do, until it suited his purpose."

"Why not ask him?"

"He would not tell me; I am sure he would not."

"Did your father lose a large sum?"

"Yes. I do not know exactly how much, but about fifty thousand pounds, I believe."

Leslie gasped; that was an enormous sum to put into such risky things as mines. If Neil's father did that, there was no telling what folly he might not have been guilty of in regard to Algar Maund.

"You do not for a moment imagine Maund lent him that amount?" said Leslie.

"I hope not. I am not sure; but I am certain he could have done so."

"Then he must be wealthy now," said Leslie.

"He is. He has lived a quiet life; he is a bachelor, with no ties, and he seldom spends money. He is worth a good deal more than we are, Coombe included."

"Your mother and sister know nothing of what you suspect?" said Leslie.

"No; it would trouble them very much if they did,"

"I should not tell them ; after all, your surmises may not be correct. I can hardly think Maund has any hold on Coombe."

"He grows more domineering every time I meet him. After the conference he said I was a ridiculous fool to give in to the men. I resented his remark, but he made no apology. Later on, as I was leaving the works, he said significantly—

"‘Your father left the entire management in my hands, and I consult you as a matter of courtesy ; but if you persist in riding rough-shod over me and my plans, I shall assert my authority. I warn you that I have ample power to do so.’"

"A veiled threat," said Leslie.

"A fairly open one, I think," replied Neil. "I ought not to have troubled you with my worries, but I assure you it has been a relief to me."

"I am glad you think me worthy of your confidence," answered Leslie, "and if I can be of any service to you, I shall be only too pleased to render you what assistance I can."

"It is very good of you," replied Neil, "and I shall not forget it."

CHAPTER VIII

A PROPOSAL TO BERYL

A FEW days after Neil Burrowes left Coombe, Algar Maund called at the house.

Mrs. Burrowes was indisposed, and kept her room, so it devolved upon Beryl to receive him ; there was no way of avoiding him, or she would gladly have made an excuse. She did not exactly fear Maund, but she detested his manner towards herself, and the way he looked at her.

She wondered, as she entered the room, if he knew her brother was away.

He did, but inquired for him, and was informed he had gone to Crowhurst on a visit to Mr. Woodsdale. This he was not aware of, and wondered what took him there.

"My mother is not well," said Beryl.

"And I hear your brother is away," he said.

"Yes."

"When will he return?"

"I do not know, probably in a week or so."

"I think he was unwise to go, when things at the works are so unsettled," he said.

"I understood the conference was postponed for three

months ; that ought to facilitate a settlement," said Beryl.

"I am not of that opinion," said Maund.

"My brother is."

"He is too sanguine."

There was an awkward silence. She saw Maund had something to say, and his manner caused her uneasiness.

"I am glad to meet you alone," he began ; and Beryl shuddered slightly with repugnance. "I have wanted to speak to you for some time. Your father trusted me ; we were like brothers, and I am sure he would approve of the proposal I am about to make."

Beryl looked at him curiously. What proposal was he about to make ? she wondered, but did not speak.

"I have known you ever since you were a child," he said. "I have watched you grow, develop into a beautiful woman. I have loved and admired you for years."

She stood up, an angry look in her eyes. "Say no more," she said. "I will not listen."

"Please sit down and hear me out ; I assure you it will be better for all."

A curious remark ; it seemed like a threat. She decided she would do as he wished ; when she knew his intentions she would act.

"That's better," he said, as she resumed her seat.

"I am old enough to be your father," he said, "but I

am strong, active, in the prime of life, and I am well off. I have longed to ask you to be my wife."

She started; the proposal was sudden, unexpected, it seemed absurd. She felt inclined to laugh in his face; then she thought of Leslie Woodsdale, and was silent.

"Many men at my age have married young wives, and the unions have been happy. I will do everything in my power to make you contented. You shall have perfect freedom, because I know you will not abuse my confidence. Beryl, I love you with the strong, matured affection of a man who has seen much of life, and who has hitherto been untouched by love. I am not an eloquent speaker—a man of a few plain words, but I assure you they come from my heart. Will you be my wife, Beryl?"

She saw he was in earnest; it troubled her. His proposal was ridiculous. She regarded it almost as an insult, yet she thought it better to conceal her feelings, and give him a kind but determined refusal.

She did not speak for a few minutes, and he asked her the question again.

She thanked him for entertaining such a good opinion of her, but said she could not possibly be his wife. He ought not to have asked her. The disparity in their ages was too great; whatever he might think, she was quite sure her father, had he been alive, would never have given his consent. Her mother must know nothing of this proposal, and her brother would be very angry

if she told him. She begged him not to refer to the subject again ; it was quite impossible to do what he asked.

She kept her feelings under control ; she was indignant that he should have made the proposal, but answered him calmly, thinking it for the best.

Algar Maund was not used to ladies' society, nor did he understand the nature of such a girl as Beryl. He was self-opinionated and conceited, and had deluded himself into the belief that a proposal to her would be acceptable. Her refusal irritated him. When he made up his mind to have a thing he generally succeeded ; he was not going to allow a chit of a girl to get the better of him. Her refusal only made him the more determined to gain his end.

"Take time to consider it," he said pompously.

"It requires no consideration. I have made up my mind. I beg of you not to mention it again," said Beryl.

"But I refuse to accept your decision," he said. "If you knew how much I love you you would be more considerate."

Beryl began to see the ludicrous side of the situation, and a smile crossed her face ; this irritated him.

"I assure you it is no laughing matter," he said sharply.

He was a plain man, his eyes were hard ; he was inclined to be stout, his manners were somewhat rough.

"When did you first decide I was good enough for you?" asked Beryl, naïvely.

"Some years ago. I have always had the idea in my head."

"Then the sooner you get it out the better."

She had recovered her spirits, and began to play the part of tormentor. She recognized a spice of danger in this course, but it only added zest to the curious interview.

"Why do you refuse my offer?" he asked.

"Oh, for several reasons."

She had forgotten her first intention to be cautious and polite.

"Name one or two?"

"It is absurd for a man of your age to propose to a girl like me," she said.

"I do not see it in that light."

"I have no love for you; that goes without saying."

"It will grow in time, when you find out how kind I am."

"I have no intention of marrying at present."

"I will wait, if you give me some hope."

"None. I can give you none. You may dispel the idea at once," she said.

"That I shall not do," he answered emphatically.

"Is this what you came for?" she said, as she rose.

"You have no message for my brother?"

"That depends upon your final answer to my proposal," he said.

"How can it possibly affect anything you may have to communicate to Neil?"

"Will you consent to be my wife?"

"No."

"That is final?"

"Yes."

"You will change your mind," he said, with a sneer; and his face wore an unpleasant look. Again the feeling that she was afraid of him came over her.

"Nothing can change my mind," she said.

He looked at her in a peculiar way. Already he seemed to her to have taken possession of her. She longed to get away from him. He seemed to be considering something. She waited for him to speak.

"I have nothing to say to your brother at present," he said slowly. "I will give you time. You will be well advised to change your mind for the sake of your mother, your brother, and yourself. If you still decline my proposal, then I shall tell your brother something that will astonish him. Be careful how you act, Beryl. I am not a man easily thwarted."

"Threats," she said with contempt. "I think I understand you; but nothing you can do will force me to become your wife."

"I have no desire to force you against your inclinations. I wish you to accept me willingly."

"Impossible."

"You dislike me?" he asked angrily.

"To be frank with you, I do," she said.

"Why?"

"Because I do not trust you."

"Your father did," he said.

"That may be. I do not," she answered:

"You will have to trust me—all of you," he snapped.

"Only in business matters," she said.

"In everything," he answered.

She laughed, for the first time since the interview commenced; it irritated him still more.

"You will find what I have to say to your brother is no laughing matter," he said angrily.

"I understand," she said. "You are so much in love with me, have such a sincere affection for me, that you would if possible force me to marry you even if I hated you."

"Which you do not," he said.

"I am not so sure about it; my feelings towards you have changed during the last half-hour."

He did not seem inclined to leave; so she said, "It is no use prolonging this interview; I must go to my mother. I wish you good morning;" and she moved towards the door.

"One moment," he said, in a voice of suppressed passion.

She stopped, looking firmly at him.

"I wish to warn you," he said.

"Indeed! against what?" she asked.

"If you show obstinacy, I have a weapon in my hand which will break it down. I do not wish to use it unless I am compelled," he said.

"I do not fear you, or your threats," she said haughtily. "I despise a man, especially of your age, who is so mean to a mere girl. Do your worst. If you annoy me with your absurd proposals again, I shall ask my brother to defend me from your persecution."

"Your brother," he said sneeringly.

"Neil is more than a match for you," she said.

"He will be on my side when he hears what I have to say."

Beryl laughed, as she replied, "He is far more likely to order you to leave the house."

With this parting shot she left the room.

As Algar Maund went out, he turned to look at the house before entering the park.

"A lovely place," he muttered. "I think I can bring Neil to see things in the right light. That girl fascinates me. She's a little spit-fire; but I can tame her. I have decided she shall be my wife, willingly if possible, if not—well, I must play my best cards and get her that way. I don't think she'll stand out when her brother tells her the news."

CHAPTER IX

BERYL TELLS NEIL

BERYL was troubled about Algar Maund's proposal. She did not disguise from herself there was danger in his threat, and wondered what it might be.

She evaded her mother's questions as to the cause of his visit, telling her he had merely called to see Neil on business.

She longed for her brother's return, although she was undecided as to the course she should take when he arrived.

Meanwhile Neil was having a good time with Leslie, and felt relieved at having told him of his trouble. At the end of a fortnight he returned home for the winter, and Leslie promised to spend Christmas at Coombe Park.

Neil soon perceived there was something wrong with Beryl. She was depressed, the joyous spirits seemed to have left her. She had a worried look.

He constantly asked her what was the matter, receiving unsatisfactory replies. At last she made up her mind to tell him of Algar Maund's visit, and proposal, at the same time endeavouring to make him promise not to quarrel with him.

"Neil, I have something to tell you," she said one evening, about a month after his return.

"I saw you had," he said; "I am glad you are going to confide in me."

"You must promise to do as I ask when you have heard everything," she said.

"If you wish it," he answered.

"I do wish it," she replied, and went on to explain that Algar Maund called during his absence.

"He knew I had gone away," said Neil, frowning. "Why did he call?"

"I hardly know how to tell you," she said. "I am sure you will be very angry, and I do not wish you to have any quarrel with him."

He looked surprised as he said, "I see no reason why I should do so at present."

Beryl spoke of Maund's manner on his arrival. "I knew he had something important to say," she said, "but did not guess what it was. Oh, Neil, I am ashamed to tell you," said Beryl, almost in tears.

"Tell me what he said. Did he insult you?" asked Neil, angrily.

Beryl avoided his look as she said, "He made love to me. Said he had watched me grow up from a child, that he had always loved me, and asked me to be his wife. Was there ever such a monstrous proposal? Oh, Neil, I am frightened of him—not exactly that, but of his threats."

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Neil. "He shall account to me for this; he shall not escape the penalty of his infamous conduct."

"You promised to do what I asked," said Beryl, "and I do not wish you to say anything to him about it at present. It will be better for him to think you know nothing of his proposal."

"But it is monstrous," he said. "I must protect you from such degradation; he may repeat his horrid proposal."

"He will not have a chance," said Beryl, smiling.

"What reason have you for wishing me to say nothing?" he asked.

"Because of his threats. He said he was sure you would be on his side when you heard what he had to say; he also said he had a weapon in his hand that would break down my opposition, but did not wish to use it unless compelled," she said.

Neil was silent, his face grave. Had Algar Maund some hold upon Coombe, or the business, of which he, Neil, knew nothing? This was what he had hinted at to Leslie Woodsdale.

Beryl noticed his downcast face, and asked eagerly if he thought Maund had any power to injure them.

"None that I know of," said Neil. "In any case, whatever power he has, or what use he may make of it, can make no difference; he has insulted you. He is an old scoundrel, and he shall pay for his conduct if I can see a way to make him."

"Do you think he may have it in his power to injure us without your knowing it?" asked Beryl, anxiously.

He had confided in Leslie, why not in his sister? They had never had secrets from each other. He made up his mind to do so.

Beryl was astonished and alarmed at what he said, which in substance was the same as he related to Leslie.

"But father would never have trusted him to that extent," she said.

"I am afraid he would," answered Leslie. "It was his one failing; Maund appeared to have a strange hold over him, which I have never been able to account for."

"Do you think Coombe is safe?" she asked.

Neil started. Coombe safe! Supposing Maund had a mortgage upon it?

"Yes. I do not think our father would have gone so far as that without letting us know."

"Even if he had a hold over Coombe, we have sufficient to live upon," said Beryl.

"Yes. But it would break mother's heart to leave Coombe," he said.

They talked a long time. There was something mysterious about this threat of Maund's. What did he mean?

"We must bide our time," said Beryl. "Perhaps we may find something out. It will be better to leave him alone for the present."

Neil reluctantly agreed to this. He would have

preferred going to the works and having it out, there and then, with Maund.

"I must try and discover the truth about these threats," he said. "He may have lent father money—a large sum—but I am almost certain it was paid off, or he would have said something about it and not left me in the dark."

"I am certain of it," said Beryl. "If it is not money matters, what can it be that he knows?"

"That I must endeavour to find out. There's James Hart!" exclaimed Neil, as he looked out of the window; "whatever can he want here? Beryl, I have an idea," he said excitedly.

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"Hart's coming at this particular moment is very strange; he may know something of the relations between my father and Maund. He has been at the works all his life, since he commenced to work, and was always trusted by father," said Neil.

"I will leave you with him," said Beryl.

James Hart was shown into Neil's study. "You are surprised to see me here, sir?" he said, smiling.

"I confess I am," said Neil.

"I thought it my duty to come and state the facts that have come to my knowledge," said Hart.

Neil's heart beat fast. Had Hart discovered anything about his father's relations with Maund? That was hardly possible. As he made no remark, James Hart went on—

"Ever since the conference Maund has been working in an underhand manner against the men. I know for a fact he has made arrangements with a certain leader of 'strike breakers' to be ready with men to replace the old hands when the three months is up. It will be close on to the winter, and, if he succeeds, there will be terrible suffering, especially among the women and children. As you are aware, such conduct is against the decision arrived at during the conference. It is an infamous breach of the trust we have placed in the firm. You are the head of the firm, sir, and I come to you, on behalf of the men, to ask you to interfere and check Maund's plan. We are fully convinced he has entered into these negotiations without your knowledge."

"He has," said Neil, "and his conduct is inexcusable."

"You will speak to him about it?"

"Decidedly I will. Can you give me any more information?"

"The name of the man he negotiated with is Lazarus Bohen. This is his address," said Hart.

"A name worthy of such a bad cause," said Neil.

"And the man is an out-and-out traitor. Lazarus Bohen was at one time a prominent member of the Union, but he 'ratted,' and went over to the other side. He has been in America, and learned strike-breaking methods there. He was responsible for the men who were shipped to the Continent over the recent strike of dock labourers," said Hart.

"You knew my father well?" said Neil.

"Very well," replied Hart, astonished at the abrupt question. "I am proud to say he placed a good deal of confidence in me."

"He and Mr. Maund were close friends?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Have you any reason to doubt they were not actually friends in the true sense of the word?" asked Neil.

"I think Algar Maund exercised undue control over your father. He seemed to have a baneful influence over him," said Hart.

"In what way?" asked Neil.

"I can hardly explain; but he caused your father to act contrary to his desires. He had a powerful hold over him in some mysterious way," said Hart.

"Will power, perhaps—a sort of hypnotism."

"Maybe," said Hart, moodily.

"Do you know anything about Maund's past?" asked Neil.

"No; at least nothing definite," said Hart.

"Will you help me, as far as lies in your power, to discover how Maund dealt with my father in money matters?" said Neil.

"I will," said Hart. "You may remember I warned you against trusting him. I have heard he lent your father a large sum of money, when he was hard hit over his Stock Exchange speculations."

"That is true," said Neil. "What I wish to discover is whether my father paid it back."

"You don't know!" exclaimed Hart, astonished.

"No; and it is most important I should find out," said Neil.

CHAPTER X

A STORMY SCENE

NEIL, having promised to speak to Maund, meant keeping his word. At the same time he knew it would be difficult to be silent about the proposal to Beryl.

He said nothing to her, but motored to Leith works, where he went into Algar Maund's office.

When Maund saw him, he thought, "He has come about the proposal made to his sister. I wondered how he would take it."

Neil felt inclined to kick Maund as he received him with a confident, self-satisfied smile.

"I have come to speak to you on a most important matter," said Neil, curtly.

"Indeed. What is it?"

"I have received information, from a well-informed quarter, that you have broken the terms of the agreement arrived at at the conference with our men," said Neil.

For once Maund was taken at a disadvantage. He had

no idea his dealings with Lazarus Bohen were known. Quickly recovering from his surprise, he concluded it was merely guess-work on Neil's part.

"In what way have I broken the terms?" he asked.

"By endeavouring to engage men to take the places of the old hands. That means you are determined to reduce their wages when the time expires."

"And supposing such to be the case, am I not justified? The state of trade will not permit a continuance of the present high rate of wages."

"I differ from you. The output has increased; we are full of orders, and there is no necessity for enforcing a reduction of wages," said Neil, firmly.

"I know more about the state of affairs than you," Maund said rudely.

"Not in this instance," said Neil.

"Why do you interfere? Why not leave things to me, as usual?" asked Maund.

"Because I am tired of being a mere cypher, entirely in your hands."

"Your father wished it."

"He did not."

"His faith in me was implicit," said Maund.

"Too much so."

"You doubt my integrity?" said Maund, angrily.

"Not quite that. I distrust your abuse of power."

"Would you be surprised to hear I have made no move in the matter?"

"Very much," said Neil.

"Well, I have not. Your information is incorrect."

"It is not," said Neil.

"You doubt my word?"

"Yes."

Maund became angry, lost his temper, said things that would have been better left unsaid; and Neil was also roused.

"I know the name of the man you have been in communication with," he said.

"Indeed; who is it?"

"Lazarus Bohen, an organizer of strike-breakers."

This was a home-thrust; still Maund did not give way.

"And pray who told you about Bohen?" he asked.

"It is quite immaterial who told me," said Neil, "the point is, it is true."

"Have you asked Bohen?" sneered Maund.

"No."

"Then you had better do so."

"I will."

Neil's firm manner irritated Maund, who half suspected where the information came from.

"There's one blessing, *you* cannot interfere with my plans," said Maund.

"I can, and will."

"I think not. I am master here," thundered Maund.

"I will not have my plans upset by a stripling."

Neil threw discretion to the winds; he hated the man,

saw him in his true colours ; believed, at that moment, he was capable of anything.

"You will find more than this plan upset," said Neil, angrily.

"What further discovery have you made?"

"During my absence you went to Coombe and insulted my sister. You had the infernal audacity to ask her to be your wife."

"Well," said Maund, grinning, "supposing I did, what of it?"

"You'll find out you have made a gross mistake. I allow no man to insult my sister with impunity, least of all such a man as you."

Neil looked threatening ; he was powerful, well built, more than a match for Algar Maund.

"I did not insult your sister ; I asked her to be my wife," said Maund.

"That was an insult," said Neil.

"She ought to be proud of the offer."

"Drop that," said Neil, "or I shall make you suffer for it."

"Threaten violence, do you?" said Maund.

"It depends upon how you act."

"I made an honourable proposal. She refused me ; but she will think better of it in time."

Neil laughed harshly at the mere idea ; then said, "You used threats ; I may as well tell you I fear neither you nor your threats,"

"I can convince you that it will be better for all of you to consent to my marriage with Beryl," said Maund.

"Call her Beryl again and I'll shake the life out of you," said Neil, coming towards him.

"Hands off," said Maund, "or I will call for help; it is not far off."

"I should like some witnesses," said Neil. "There's James Hart crossing the yard; call him in."

"Hart is a firebrand; he's the curse of the place. He's at the bottom of all the trouble," said Maund.

"I would prefer to see my sister married to James Hart," said Neil, quietly; "he would be an infinitely better match than you."

"Compare me with that fellow, a common workman!" said Maund, with contempt.

"You were a workman once, and I should say decidedly common," said Neil.

"You shall pay dearly for this," said Maund, his face livid, his body trembling with passion.

"You cannot frighten me with your threats, keep them for women and girls."

"I'll take the roof from your head; I'll turn you out of Coombe," said Maund, losing all control over himself.

"That's a likely story," laughed Neil, but at the same time felt uneasy.

"I can do it and I will," foamed Maund, "unless you agree to my proposal,"

"Anything more?" asked Niel, calmly.

"Isn't that sufficient? Do you wish to leave Coombe?"

"No, I have no intention of doing so."

"I can force you."

"Ridiculous nonsense."

"I hold a mortgage on the property," said Maund.

"Where is it?"

"I have it safe enough."

"Show it me."

"All in good time," said Maund.

"I tell you it is a lie; you do not hold the deeds of the property," said Neil.

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Have you examined them carefully?"

"I have."

"There is no flaw in them?"

"None; they are quite in order."

"That may be so; at the same time I have an acknowledgment from your father which gives me a first charge on Coombe estate for the sum of fifty thousand pounds. Can you pay that off?"

"Yes," said Neil, "if you can prove your claim."

Algar Maund was staggered; was it bluff on Neil's part? It must be.

"If you pay that sum you will have to leave Coombe; you cannot afford to keep it up."

"You know nothing about that. Let me warn you; I

am going to find out whether my father paid you the money he borrowed. I believe he did, otherwise he would have mentioned it to me before he died."

"Do you insinuate that your father paid me fifty thousand pounds and that I am nothing better than a robber?" shouted Maund.

"That is what it amounts to; you have summed up the situation accurately," said Neil.

"It's a lie, a libel; I'll institute a criminal prosecution against you," said Maund, savagely.

"You have no witnesses," said Neil.

"I have a very important witness to the fact that your father, at his death, owed me the amount I have stated," said Maund.

"Indeed!"

"I hold his written guarantee, which states in clear terms, that the sum of fifty thousand was owing me, and that the Coombe estate is given as security. It is duly signed and witnessed."

"Again I ask, may I see it?" said Neil.

"It will be produced at the proper time," said Maund.

"Even if what you say were true, which I do not believe, it would make no difference to your odious proposal to my sister."

"Then I must place the facts before Mrs. Burrowes," said Maund.

"You cannot; I will not allow it, My mother is in a

delicate state of health; the mere idea of such a thing would utterly break her down," said Neil.

Maund saw he had scored a point, and said, "I do not wish to cause Mrs. Burrowes any anxiety, and if you and your sister listen to reason, I will forego all claim to Coombe, forfeit the amount due, and leave the business management here in your hands. I have an ample fortune. I will go so far as to retire from the firm."

"And you think I will try and persuade my sister to listen to your proposal."

"You will be well advised to do so."

"Listen to me," said Neil, harshly. "I would sooner see Beryl dead than married to you. The degradation would kill her. No bribe you can offer will ever change my purpose. I warn you I shall not rest until I have found out the truth. Something tells me my father repaid you the whole of the money he borrowed. The strike shall not take place, because I will decline to accede to your demands. I am on the side of the men; they shall have justice."

"I can afford to wait," said Maund, with a vindictive look on his face.

CHAPTER XI

A CHANCE MEETING

NEIL BURROWES was ill at ease; the interview with Algar Maund troubled him.

Maund spoke confidently about the document in his possession; if it existed Coombe would have to go.

Neil, however, had some consolation in the thought that, after all, Maund's statement was a mere attempt to frighten him. He was almost certain his father had repaid the loan; the fact of nothing having been said about it was convincing.

If it had been paid, then there ought to be a document in existence proving it—a discharge from Algar Maund.

Neil searched all his father's papers again and again, finding nothing connected with the Coombe estate that he had not seen before.

The old desk his father had used was in Neil's study, and he searched all the drawers carefully.

He tried to dismiss the matter from his mind; but it hovered over him like a cloud. He became gloomy and depressed.

Beryl did all in her power to cheer him. She knew nothing of what had taken place at the interview with Maund. Neil thought it best not to tell her.

Mrs. Burrowes was kept in the dark. It would have been risky to inform her of the facts. The doctor said her heart was weak, that undue or sudden excitement might prove fatal.

The conference with the men's representatives at the end of three months was satisfactory. Maund gave way, for reasons of his own ; no reduction of wages was made, and the men were jubilant. They cheered Neil furiously, as he announced the decision at a large meeting. His popularity in the Leith division was so great that it was suggested he should stand for Parliament at the next election in the Unionist interest. A deputation waited upon him. It was known the present representative would shortly retire, owing to ill health, and the party wished to be prepared.

Neil accepted the position, and a week or two later the sitting member resigned.

James Hart was asked to stand in the Labour interest, but declined. His answer was characteristic of the man. He said—

“Mr. Burrowes is the proper man to represent us. It was through his influence our wages were not reduced. He is always on our side when our demands are just. He is as good a Labour representative as you can get, and his influence in the House will be far greater than mine. Vote for him ; that is my advice.”

Hart's lead was followed, and the men at Leith Works did their best for Neil Burrowes. He was elected by

a large majority, and on taking his seat in the House met with a great reception, as he had gained a victory with Tariff Reform as the main plank in his platform.

Algar Maund secretly worked against him, but his plans failed.

Neil was surprised Maund made no further move in regard to Beryl. What was the reason of his inaction? Was he biding his time, so that the blow might be more effective?

A week before Christmas Leslie Woodsdale arrived at Coombe Park.

The weather was mild; there was a prospect of some good sport in the coverts. He was in excellent spirits; everything was going on well at Crowhurst. Benvolio was galloping in great form; if he wintered well, Ben Lade was in hopes of securing a good double event, the City and Suburban and the Jubilee Stakes, over which a fortune could be won for a comparatively modest outlay.

Leslie had ample means for his bachelor wants, but he was looking ahead to something else; he wanted Beryl, and he wished to be able to offer her a suitable home and a substantial fortune. Benvolio was his hope—the pick of the stable, the best horse, Lade said, he ever handled.

He was enthusiastic about the horse; Neil and Beryl caught the infection; during the long winter evenings the prospects of the spring campaign were considered.

The season was quietly kept at Coombe. Every one was happy; cares were thrown aside for the time being, and Neil almost forgot the existence of Algar Maund.

One bright frosty morning Neil went to Leith, Beryl to see a friend who was ill, and Leslie into the woods in search of game.

Beryl loved a long walk in the keen air, and a matter of six miles was a trifle to her. She remained for lunch, and then commenced her walk home.

About a mile from Coombe she saw Algar Maund coming towards her. What was he doing there? Had he been to the house and inquired for her? That was hardly possible. It was unlikely he had watched her; the meeting must be a mere chance.

She would have passed him; but he stood directly in her path, and spoke to her.

"This is a happy chance," he said. "I am glad I have met you."

His manner was deferential. Beryl was surprised at the change; it put her more at her ease.

"I trust you have had a happy Christmas," she said, not knowing exactly what to say.

He smiled as he answered, "It has been a very lonely one. I am a forlorn bachelor."

"You don't look forlorn," she said.

"Do not be angry with me," he said, almost humbly. "I want to ask you if you have thought over my proposal again,"

"I have not," she said, a change in her manner. "I gave you to understand my decision was final."

"I am sorry, because it forces me to take steps I should not otherwise have done," he said.

She made no answer, and he went on, "The dearest wish I have is to make you my wife, and I will sacrifice everything to that end."

"I cannot listen to you ; please allow me to pass," she said.

He remained firm, still standing in her way. "You refuse to listen to my proposal ?"

"Yes."

"There is no prospect of you changing your mind ?"

"No."

"I am to be thrust aside because you are in love with another man."

Beryl felt her cheeks grow red under his close scrutiny.

Did she love another man ? was the question in her mind.

Maund noticed her confusion ; it angered him. He had met her by chance as he was going for a walk, and augured favourably from it ; the result was disappointing.

"You are in love with Leslie Woodsdale," he said harshly.

"You are insulting," said Beryl. "Let me pass."

"You must hear me," he said sharply, "if only for your mother's sake,"

Her mother! What could he possibly have to say that would affect her mother?

"You refuse to marry me; very well, you must be prepared to take the consequences."

"I am," said Beryl, haughtily.

"You do not know what they are," he said.

"Nor do I care."

"I can force you all to leave Coombe Park," he said.

Beryl laughed; his statement seemed absurd, and yet her brother had hinted at Maund having some hold over them.

"Laugh as much as you like," he said. "Your mother is delicate, has heart disease; it would probably kill her to leave Coombe."

"It would," said Beryl.

"Your father borrowed money from me, a large sum. He gave me a first charge on Coombe as security for the loan; I hold his signed and witnessed document to that effect. Now do you understand?" he asked.

A frightened look came into Beryl's eyes. Was he telling her the truth?

"There is one way of avoiding this disaster," he said. "If you accept my proposal, I will hand you the document, cancel the debt, give your brother my share in the firm, and retire to live happily with you. I am rich, and you shall have all you desire; nothing shall be too good

for you. I love you desperately; will you be my wife, Beryl?"

"No, a thousand times no! Do your worst," she said. "I do not believe a word you say."

He kept his temper, but his passions were roused.

"I will not hurry you; I will give you as much as six months to think it over; but I warn you that at the end of that time I shall be implacable if you do not give me a favourable answer," he said.

Beryl made no reply; she walked forward. He stood aside and let her pass.

"Remember," he said. "It is a serious matter for all of you."

It was rapidly growing dark, and Beryl hurried homeward with agitated feelings.

"He must have spoken the truth," she thought; "he would never have made such an assertion otherwise—he dare not. What am I to do? Coombe, dear old Coombe! We cannot part with it; and yet the sacrifice—it is too horrible to think of." She shuddered with repulsion, and walked faster.

Algar Maund stood watching her until she disappeared. When he turned round he saw Leslie Woodsdale standing before him.

CHAPTER XII

LESLIE WINS

LESLIE, shooting in the woods, an excuse for passing the time, admired the scenery, and had but little sport. He walked several miles, then wondered where he was, how far from Coombe?

As he went along he fancied he heard voices. He listened. Yes, it was Beryl's; he was sure of it, although he could not catch all she said. The other was a man. The tones were harsh; they seemed to be disputing. It was lonely. He pressed forward cautiously; he might be of use to her.

He distinctly heard Maund's last words, before Beryl left him, and his parting caution to remember.

He saw Maund looking after her, and slipped into the pathway before he turned round.

When Maund saw and recognized him, he wondered if he had heard anything, if so, how much?

"I think we have met before," said Leslie.

"You are Mr. Woodsdale?" said Maund.

"Yes."

"On a visit to Coombe. I hope your stay has been pleasant?" said Maund, sneeringly.

"Very ; I have had a most delightful time."

"Much shooting ?"

"Quite sufficient to amuse me."

"You are returning to the house ?"

"Yes ; which way are you going ?"

"Not yours," was the curt reply.

"That's hardly civil," said Leslie, smiling.

"Probably you heard me talking to the young lady," said Maund.

"I certainly heard voices."

"And recognized them ?"

"Miss Burrowes's, yes."

"Eavesdropping ?" said Maund.

"Not at all ; a mere chance. I am not a spy."

"When a man's in love he'll spy or anything else."

"Are you in love ?" asked Leslie, coolly, but with a keen look in his eyes.

Maund was irritated ; this young man was chaffing him.

"I presume I have as much right to be in love as you have," he said.

"Getting a bit past it, are you not ?" asked Leslie.

"Falling into the sear and yellow leaf, and so on."

"You'll do well not to interfere with my plans," said Maund.

"Seeing that I do not know what they are, it is hardly likely I shall interfere," said Leslie.

"I have proposed to Miss Burrowes, and she will accept me ; she as good as promised."

Leslie glared at him ; then the ludicrous side of it appealed to him, and he laughed heartily.

"You may laugh," said Maund ; "but I hold the winning hand."

"Do you indeed ? Wonderful how tastes differ. Now, if I had been in Miss Burrowes's place, I would have refused you point blank."

"You're in love with her," said Maund.

"Am I ? Even so, can you wonder at it ?"

"Take a word of warning, do not make love to her."

"Why not ?"

"Because if you do, and she is foolish enough to favour you, trouble will come of it."

"I understood you to say she had as good as accepted you," said Leslie.

"That is so."

"Then what chance can I have?" said Leslie, banteringly.

"None, none at all," said Maund, savagely.

"As you are not very entertaining, I will leave you," said Leslie.

"For her sake I warn you not to come between us," said Maund.

"You seem desperately afraid of losing her."

Maund turned away in a rage, and Leslie walked on in the direction taken by Beryl, laughing to himself at the ridiculous figure her would-be lover cut.

Leslie judged from the words he overheard that Maund's

audacious proposal had been promptly refused, as a matter of course it would. He also thought over Neil's communication to him at Crowhurst. Had Maund's ridiculous offer any connection with it? There had been a threat as Beryl left him.

Neil was away until late ; Beryl was alone with Leslie.

She seemed troubled. He longed to comfort her. The situation became charged with the electric flame of love ; it thrilled them.

He had not intended speaking to her yet. He was not in a position to do so ; but he made a sudden resolve to throw discretion to the winds and ask her to be his wife. The thought that Algar Maund had dared to do so urged him on ; if there was danger he might be of some service to her.

Beryl was very quiet ; she felt what he was about to say, and the thought that he loved her was soothing, disarmed her fears.

Leslie spoke out of the fulness of his heart, and she listened responsively. He became eloquent in pleading his cause ; she never doubted he loved her, was in deadly earnest.

"I ought not to have spoken so soon," he said. "I am hardly in a position to do so, for I am not well off, but all I have I offer you with my love. I was in the woods this afternoon when I heard voices. Recognizing yours, and hearing the man's raised in angry tones, I thought I might be of use, so crept forward. I heard Maund threaten

to do something as you walked away. This has influenced me in asking you to be my wife. Give me the right to protect you. You will be my wife, Beryl? You love me, don't you? Say it is so."

She did not hesitate. If she accepted him she might talk freely about her troubles; he would have the right to know and sympathize with her. This would be comforting, consoling.

He took her hands, drew her gently towards him. She made no resistance, but nestled in his arms, looked into his face, with love in her eyes. He kissed her, then said, "You will be my wife, Beryl?" and she answered as he desired.

They were happy in their love. The sudden declaration seemed to overwhelm them for a time. Gradually they became calmer. Beryl said—

"How much of the conversation did you overhear?"

"Only Maund's parting threats; but I met him when you had gone. He gave me an important piece of news. I have tested his accuracy; it has failed, as I expected."

"What was the news?" she asked.

"He said he had proposed to you, and that you had as good as given him your promise to accept him."

"The wretch!" said Beryl. "He is a hateful, bad man."

"I agree with you," said Leslie, smiling. "Beryl, what did he mean by his threat?"

Ought she to tell him? He was her lover. She had

accepted him. . Yes; he ought to know. Neil would approve of it.

Hurriedly she related what Algar Maund had said. How he stated that if she refused his offer, in six months time Coombe Park would be the price of her obstinacy.

"He can have no claim upon Coombe," said Leslie. "He is only trying to frighten you."

"I fear he has," said Beryl. "He mentioned that he held a paper my father gave him, in which Coombe was security for a heavy loan."

"Maund is a coward. I am sure of it," said Leslie. "He holds this threat over you in order to frighten you. I'd like to thrash him," he added savagely.

They talked the matter over for some time, Leslie promising to assist her in everything, and in any way she desired.

Neil came in. He saw something had taken place, and guessed what it was.

"You both look happy," he said meaningly.

"I think I may say we are," answered Leslie, smiling. "I have asked Beryl to be my wife, and she has accepted me. I hope you approve?"

Neil kissed his sister, then turned to Leslie, and said—

"I am very glad. I know no one I would sooner have for a brother."

"I have told him about Maund," said Beryl, and went on to say how she had met him during the afternoon, and what had occurred.

"He told me the same thing," said Neil. "I cannot understand it. I feel convinced my father paid the money back, or he would have explained the matter to me before he died, not left me in the dark. If I could only find a clue, some letter or paper, which would put me on the right track. I have searched everywhere, but can find no acknowledgment from Maund that the money has been returned."

"It is mysterious," said Neil. "Perhaps his threats are mere bluff."

"Not altogether. He has something to go upon," said Neil, "or he would not be so sure of his ground."

"If your father repaid the money, Maund must be a scoundrel to act in this way," said Leslie.

"He is utterly unscrupulous," said Neil. "I have found that out since I paid more attention to the business. He has done nothing illegal, although he has sailed near the wind, and has feathered his nest well. He is too cunning to commit himself. James Hart was right. He said I would find him out."

"When he learns of our engagement he will see it is useless to persevere," said Beryl.

"I think it will be better to say nothing about it at present," said Neil. "Leave Maund in the dark, and see how far he will go. The cleverest men overstep the mark sometimes."

"He has given me six months in which to make up my mind," said Beryl, smiling.

"During that time we have a respite," said Neil, "to consider the best way to checkmate him."

"A good deal may happen in six months," said Leslie.

"Yes," said Beryl; "it may. For instance, Benvolio may win your double."

"There are more unlikely things," said Leslie. "My last letter from Lade says the horse is in great form. The mild winter suits him, and the going on the training track is excellent."

CHAPTER XIII

"THEY'RE OFF"

SPRING came, and with it the first Epsom meeting.

Benvolio was tried early in April, and again easily defeated the horses galloped with him.

"It is as good a trial as he won last autumn," said Ben Lade. "I thought he would retain his form."

"We cannot complain of the weight in the City," said Leslie.

"No. Seven stone six pounds is a nice racing weight for him. It gives him a chance in the Jubilee if he wins at Epsom."

"I shall back him for the double," said Leslie.

"You ought to get a fair price," answered Ben.

In the lists Benvolio was quoted at twenty to one for the City, and twenty-five to one for the Jubilee. As he was taken for the double the best price offered was two hundred and fifty pounds to one.

Leslie managed to secure over twelve thousand pounds for an investment of fifty, which he considered good business. He also backed Benvolio through a clever commissioner to win him a large stake over the Epsom race alone.

Neil and his sister came to Crowhurst a few days before the Spring meeting.

It was the first time Beryl had seen Benvolio, and she was enthusiastic about him. The four-year-old looked splendid—in tip-top condition.

“Fit to run for a man’s life,” said Ben.

“What a beauty he is!” she said. “I am sure he will win.”

“Looks don’t go for everything,” said Leslie, laughing.

“In this case, I fancy he will prove in the race to be as good as he looks,” said Neil.

Mrs. Bunting was charmed with Beryl, so was Ben Lade. Leslie was amused at their open admiration for her.

“I expect they’ll make a match of it,” said the housekeeper.

“She’s a good-looking girl,” said Ben, “and he couldn’t do better.”

“She’s more than good looking, she’s good tempered,” said Eliza.

"It's more than you are," thought Ben, as he said, "A good-tempered woman is as rare as a filly without a blemish."

"There's plenty of amiable women in the world until their tempers are spoiled by the men," said Eliza.

"Did the late Mr. Bunting spoil yours, my dear?" asked the trainer.

"He tried his best."

"Succeeded fairly well, eh?" said Ben.

"If that's your opinion it's not other people's. You'd spoil any woman with your grumblings and growlings. I wonder you don't sour the horses; your looks are sufficient to do so at times," she retorted.

"I don't mind telling you, in strict confidence, that if you were more angelic, not given to snapping, I'd probably consider whether it was worth while taking you over for life," said Ben.

"You indeed!" snorted Eliza. "I wouldn't have you at a gift."

"You'd jump at the chance," said Ben.

"You're not the only eligible man in the world."

"Perhaps not; but, all the same, you know you like me, 'Liza."

"My name's Eliza; there's an 'E' in it, and don't you forget it. As for liking you, I may do—at a distance."

"I'll think it over, my dear, and when I have made up my mind to run in couples, I'll mention it to you."

"Very condescending of you, I'm sure," she said, tossing her head.

"Upon my word, you're a fine woman when you draw yourself up to your full height. Always carry yourself well, it suits you," said Ben.

The City and Suburban day came round, and Leslie and his visitors went to Epsom. Both Neil and Beryl had backed Benvolio for the double, and straight out, but only for a modest amount. It was an average field; three or four first-class horses were running, the remainder had shown fair form at one time or another.

The previous year's Derby winner, Sun Ray, was top weight, and as he always ran well on Epsom Course, he had a big following. This was the only horse Ben Lade feared, but he felt confident he could not give the weight away to Benvolio.

In the paddock the usual crowd criticized the runners and their condition.

The favourite, Sun Ray, looked as fit as could be, and all connected with him were sanguine of success. He was a powerful chestnut, with four white stockings, stood nearly seventeen hands, made up in proportion. He was to be ridden by Twells, who had landed the Derby on him.

Benvolio had not such a commanding appearance as Sun Ray, but he was much admired, and shrewd judges fancied him at his weight.

Seth Sutton was to ride him. He had been at Crowhurst

several times, and was quite satisfied his mount had a chance second to none. Sutton was a sound, reliable little man, nearly forty years of age, and as active as a kitten. His bodily weight was about seven stone five pounds, and he had no difficulty in keeping himself down. He had one failing, for which he was not responsible: he was rather short-sighted. To make up for this deficiency he was a great judge of pace, and was seldom at fault when summing up the chances of horses alongside him in a race. He had an old face, sharp, twinkling eyes, a humorous smile, and a keen wit. His popularity with race-crowds was immense, for his honesty was undoubted. He had a habit of riding to the post slowly, along the rails, chaffing with any one who spoke to him as he passed.

Beryl caught sight of Leslie's colours—green, white stars, green cap.

"What a funny little man!" she exclaimed, laughing.

"Seth," said Leslie. "You are quite right, he is a humorous fellow."

"I meant his appearance."

"He's forty," said Leslie, "or nearly so; and has been riding ever since he was fourteen—he wears well."

"Not getting stale?" said Neil.

"No; he's better than many of the younger ones," said Leslie. And as Seth came up he introduced him.

The jockey eyed Beryl, saw she was a charming girl, and looked at Leslie with a twinkle in his eyes.

"If that's his girl he's an eye for beauty," thought the jockey.

Beryl looked down at him. His diminutive size made her feel tall. What a curious little man he was. She smiled at him as she said jokingly—

"Are you big enough to win on Benvolio?"

"I fancy I am," said Seth, "if the horse is good enough."

"You think he is?" she asked.

"Must have a chance. Ben says he's the pick of the stable; but that may not mean much, it all depends upon the others," said Seth.

"He's good enough, if you are!" snapped Ben.

"Ben's a real old growler," said Seth, "but not half a bad sort."

Beryl laughed. "You know him well," she said.

"Yes; have done for years. He owes a lot of his success to me," said Seth.

"Do I?" snapped Ben. "The boot's on the other leg."

"I hear Phebe has a good chance," said Leslie.

"I've ridden her," said the jockey. "She's uncertain, but can gallop when in the humour. She'll be thereabouts at the finish if her temper's all right. Snowstorm and Demon have chances."

"What about Sun Ray?" asked Neil.

"A good horse, a very good horse; but it's a heap of weight to give away to a colt like Benvolio," said Seth.

"Come, get into the saddle, or you'll be late out," said Ben.

Seth mounted. He looked smaller still perched on the horse with his stirrups short.

"Leathers right length?" said Ben.

"Yes."

"You like to see your knees as near your chin as possible," said Ben, who hated the crouching seat. "Mind you don't pitch over his head coming down the hill."

"Better stand at the corner ready to catch me," said Seth, as he rode after the others.

Cheers greeted Sun Ray. A good horse always commands the admiration of racegoers, he becomes a popular idol; even those who have not backed him never begrudge him a win.

Benvolio figured at ten to one in the market, at which price he was well backed. He moved freely, and made heaps of friends by his taking style; many men who had backed the favourite put a saver on him.

Seth as usual walked his mount alongside the rails. Running comments were made by people leaning over. He had a smart reply for many of them.

"I hope you'll win, little man."

"Think I shall, Fatty."

"You'll not beat Sun Ray, Seth."

"You'll get no shiners out of him to-day," was the answer..

"Mind and stick on, old 'un."

"Come and hold me."

Seth was last at the post; the starter was waiting for him.

"You're not in a hurry," he said.

"Never am except at the finish," answered the jockey.

Seth was a favourite with the starter, as with most people, and he said—

"One of these days they'll get away without you."

"But you'll give me a chance of catching 'em," said Seth.

Phebe was restless, causing some trouble. She was a peculiar-tempered mare at the best of times. Seth kept Benvolio away from her, as she lashed out viciously.

"Rum mare that," said Twells, as he came alongside Seth.

"I've ridden her," he replied. "She's no catch."

"Good-looking horse you're on," commented Twells. "Fancy him?"

"A bit; he's a chance, but he's not in the same class with yours," said Seth.

"I'll keep some of them at it all the way," said Twells.

"He means the pace to be good," thought Seth.

Beryl was on the top of the stand, with Neil and Leslie; she had a splendid view over the downs. It was her first visit to Epsom and everything was new to her.

"What a crowd!" she exclaimed.

"Nothing to what it is on Derby Day," said Leslie.

A shout from the packed enclosure below, and she said, "What's that for?"

"They're off," said Leslie; "we shall soon see what Benvolio can do."

CHAPTER XIV

"A LEG IN"

DEMON moved off quickly, soon establishing a long lead; at least ten lengths separated him from the field. Amiable, Phebe, and Daylight came at the head of the others, with Sun Ray, and Benvolio close on their track.

So they ran along the top stretch, round the bend, and past the bushes; as they came in sight, before the corner, Demon still led, but was falling back.

Seth Sutton had been round Tattenham Corner more times than he cared to remember. He had a vivid recollection of a City and Suburban many years ago, in which he had his leg fractured against the rails, and a narrow escape of coming down; he always thought of it as he neared the corner, and it made him careful.

Twells sent Sun Ray along at a great pace, getting on to the rails; Seth was contented to steer behind him.

Several horses swept round wide, leaving a gap; no sooner were they in the straight than Seth urged Benvolio on, and soon drew level with the favourite again.

"The beggar sticks to me," thought Twells, who fancied he had got rid of him.

There was some pitching down the hill, and half a dozen horses were hopelessly out of it.

Demon was beaten, and Daylight ran into his place.

Sun Ray, for a big horse, shaped well down the hill, and Seth knew Benvolio was revelling in his work. Already he fancied he held the winning chance, but was too old a hand to be over sanguine, or take liberties with the field. He saw the favourite going well, despite his weight, and judged the chief danger was Sun Ray.

In the dip Twells challenged Daylight, and the pair raced together amidst the cheers of the dense crowd. Phebe put in a brilliant run on the outside and drew level. It was a fine race so far.

Benvolio was going great guns, Seth felt certain of catching the leaders.

Beryl watched the green jacket and white stars, her heart palpitating with excitement. She saw Seth crouching forward, and said to herself—

"He must win, Benvolio is going splendidly."

The result meant much to Leslie; if Benvolio won he would have a leg in for his big double. He knew the Kempton course would suit the horse better than the Epsom slopes.

"The favourite's going well," said Neil, "so is Benvolio. That was a rare turn of speed Phebe showed; she is a good mare."

"I tried to buy her once," said Leslie.

"She'd make an excellent mate for Benvolio," said Neil.

Daylight was first to crack up ; this left Sun Ray and Phebe together.

Twells was confident. He had no doubts about beating the mare, and nothing else was near him—at least so he thought.

Benvolio was on the rails. Seth had been driven into that position by Daylight as he fell back ; he was on the look-out for an opening. If he pulled his mount out, he would lose ground at a critical moment ; on the other hand, he might be shut in. Should he risk it and remain where he was ?

"He'll be blocked," said Leslie, excitedly ; "he'll never get through. Why doesn't he come round ? It's his only chance."

"He sees something we cannot, or he'd not stay there," said Neil.

Seth saw Phebe failing. She was on the outside, Sun Ray on the rails. He guessed if the mare fell away from the favourite, Sun Ray might swerve to the right and give him a chance.

It was a wonderful exercise of patience for Seth to keep where he was ; the temptation to pull out was great.

Luckily, the mare fell back with remarkable suddenness ; and Sun Ray, as Seth anticipated, bore out to the right.

Here was his chance. He cut Benvolio with the whip, and the horse responded gamely. Like a flash, he shot up on the rails and took the measure of Sun Ray.

Twells saw what had happened, and endeavoured to remedy the mistake. He was mortified to think he had held the finish too cheap, and that Benvolio might possibly beat him. He was a brilliant rider, a desperate jockey in a finish, and he exerted all his powers to win. He had a great horse under him. Sun Ray never flinched. He battled along under his top weight, not giving way an inch; but he could go no faster, and Benvolio had a run left in him.

No man knew how to husband a horse's strength for the final pinch better than Seth. He always appeared to know exactly how much his mount had left in him.

The trio on the stand became wildly excited. This struggle was worth seeing. The green jacket and white stars was level with the canary and scarlet of the favourite.

Beryl held her breath. This was a race indeed; one of those breathless finishes, in which the interested spectator became absorbed, utterly oblivious of his or her surroundings.

Roars of cheering greeted the favourite. The name of Sun Ray welled over the downs. It was a repetition of his Derby race; but he was in a tighter fix now. On

that memorable day, in the first week of last June, Sun Ray silenced all opposition as they breasted the rise; but to-day he had a tough task. Would he pull through?

Both riders were hard at it; but the advantage Seth gained by slipping up on the rails told its tale. Had he gone round, the result would have been certain defeat. He saw it now.

A lull in the shouting; then a terrific yell of, "Benvolio! Benvolio!"

Leslie's horse had his head in front. Again Sun Ray drew level. At the next stride Benvolio held the advantage again.

A few yards more, and it would be all over. No one could name the winner.

The tension was great. Beryl felt hot and cold in turn. She shivered with excitement. Would the green and white never get ahead of that persistent canary jacket?

They past the post, seemingly locked together, and Leslie said—

"I believe he just got up ~~in~~ time."

"Benvolio?" asked Beryl, excitedly.

"Yes."

"The number! What is it?" said Neil.

It seemed a terrible time before the winning figures appeared. Were there two or one?

Leslie caught sight of a large *one*.

"We're beaten," he said.

"No," shouted Neil; "there's another figure."

Twelve was hoisted.

"Hurrah!" shouted Beryl; and many turned to look at her excited face, smiling at her genuine pleasure.

"By Jove! it was a narrow squeak," said Leslie.

"It is sufficient," said Neil. "We've won."

"What a splendid leg in!" said Leslie.

"Can he carry his penalty and win?" asked Neil.

"I think so. He'll not have a horse like Sun Ray to meet, and the Jubilee course will suit him."

They made their way down the steps of the crowded stand, forcing a passage to the paddock.

Before they arrived, the weighing in was accomplished, and Ben Lade was busy with Benvolio. Seth had to ride in the next race, for which he was preparing.

"Just got home," said Leslie.

"He ought to have won by a couple of lengths," said Ben. "Seth admits it. He says if he could have made his run sooner, the result would never have been in doubt. It was lucky he got that opening on the rail, or he'd have lost for a certainty."

"It was not Seth's fault. He was shut in," said Leslie.

"No, I don't think it was. He took a great risk; but it came off. Had Benvolio lost, we should have blamed him," said Ben.

"He doesn't look distressed," said Neil.

"Not a bit. He hardly blew at all when he came in," said the trainer.

Beryl patted Benvolio's neck, and the horse looked at her, then pushed his nose against her arm; she stroked it.

"Feels just like velvet," she said. "You're a dear good horse for winning such a great race. I love you, indeed I do. You're a beauty!"

"He's all that, miss," said Ben.

"What about the Jubilee?" asked Leslie.

Ben turned round. Several people stood close by, looking at the horse.

"No chance, with his penalty," said Ben. "He was all out—couldn't have gone another yard."

Leslie looked surprised, but a wink from Ben put him on his guard.

"The old chap's quite right. The beggar has no chance at Kempton. I saw he was all out—rolled past the post dead beat," said an extravagantly dressed young man to his companions as they walked away.

"Hear him," chuckled Ben. "I reckon I've given him a hint that will lose him his money."

"Then you think he has a chance in the Jubilee?" said Leslie.

"A better chance than he had to-day; but Seth will not have to be shut in at the bend—it's a sharp turn at Kempton, and he'll have to give it a clear berth," said Ben.

"The double looks like coming off," said Leslie.

"I do hope it will," said Beryl. "We must be at Kempton for the Jubilee, Neil."

Her brother laughed, as he said, "You have caught the racing fever badly. It will never do to go rushing from north to south like this."

CHAPTER XV

JAMES HART'S MOVE

ALGAR MAUND was seated in his private office at Leith works. It was a small room, and the furniture was plain. An American desk, which seemed much too large, occupied nearly the whole of one side. There were safes in various parts, some large, others small. The walls were bare, painted, and looked cold; the only relief was a framed portrait of Neil's father suspended over the desk.

Maund sat at a table, his chin resting on one hand, gazing at the likeness of his late partner.

Something seemed to trouble him; the portrait irritated him. He got up and took it down.

"Confound the thing! Why do I let it worry me? Every time I look at his picture I feel a sort of shiver pass over me. His eyes seem to glare at me, to pierce me through."

His thoughts made him moody. He moved uneasily in his chair.

"I have left her alone since Christmas," he muttered;

"but the six months will soon be up, and then I must have her answer. If she refuses me, I shall act. There's no risk, that I can see—none at all. Burrowes was always careless with his papers. If there had been anything, it would have been found."

Maund thought over sundry business transactions he had dragged Neil's father into—rash speculations and divers investments which turned out ruinous. He had managed to steer clear himself, often making a profit where his partner lost.

He had only a fragment of conscience, but, as he sat thinking over things, what little he possessed troubled him more than usual. He knew he had not acted well by his dead partner in business matters, and now he was about to take a step he almost dreaded.

Coombe he cared very little about. He had no wish to obtain possession of it, except as a means to an end.

His infatuation for Beryl was such that it obliterated almost all other thoughts from his mind. Her refusal aggravated this feeling, made him the more determined to possess her. Yet he dreaded what would come of it if he was found out. Already he had gone too far to draw back. He must establish his claim on Coombe at all costs.

Rising from his seat, he opened one of the smaller safes. It was curiously strong, with only two drawers in. From one of these he took out a paper, read it carefully, then placed it on the table.

"There can be no disputing that," he said; "unless—bah! what is there to fear?"

The document was legally drawn, and gave Algar Maund a first charge on the Coombe estate for fifty thousand pounds.

A shadow passed across the window, some one coming to see him. He pushed the paper under his blotting-pad.

"James Hart asks to see you, sir."

Maund started. What could Hart possibly want with him? They were enemies.

He hesitated a moment, then said, "Send him in."

Hart entered the room, hat in hand.

"This is a surprise," said Maund. "What is your business?"

"It's about the men," he answered.

"More bother with them? I knew how it would be," said Maund. "What's the trouble?"

"Overtime."

"What about it?"

"They want an extra threepence an hour."

Maund stared. This was an extravagant demand.

"They are not likely to get it."

"I think they are," said Hart. "They deserve it. Mr. Burrowes is quite willing they should have it. He recognizes that the rush of work warrants it."

"He knows how to work his cards," said Maund, with a sneer. "He has no wish to lose votes next time. It

is an easy way of courting popularity ; but I am not going to stand it."

"I think you'll agree to it," said Hart, confidently.

"What makes you sanguine ?"

"Something I have been put in possession of," said Hart.

"What do you mean ?" asked Maund ; a vague feeling of uncasiness rising.

"The late Mr. Burrowes borrowed a large sum from you," said Hart.

"How the deuce came he to know ?" thought Maund.

"And what if he did ?" he asked.

"He paid it back before he died," said Hart, watching him closely.

Algar Maund turned livid, his hands clenched ; he glared savagely at Hart.

"It's a lie," he said ; "he did not pay it back."

Hart was fully convinced Mr. Burrowes had repaid the loan, Algar Maund's agitation proved it, even had he no other evidence.

"I haven't been here since I was a lad for nothing," said Hart. "I know more than you think, and you are treading on dangerous ground."

Maund laughed harshly. "I treat your idle talk with contempt," he said.

"Mr. Burrowes trusted me," said Hart. "I knew a good deal about his affairs."

"More fool he for telling a man in your position anything about his private concerns," said Maund,

"I am a better man than you, Algar Maund," said Hart.

Maund grinned as he said, "That's news to me. I thought I had got on a good deal better than you."

"You occupy a higher position at the works; but you have not a clean sheet. There is a lot of dirty work on your hands."

"I have no desire to hear anything more," said Maund.

"Hits you too hard, does it?" said Hart.

"Leave the room!"

"I shall not, until you give me an answer about the overtime."

"You have it."

"You refuse the advance?"

"Absolutely."

"Very well, then you must take the consequences."

"What are they?" sneered Maund.

"Exposure," said Hart, quietly.

Again Maund felt some fear of this man. What did he know? How came he in possession of important facts?

"You threaten me?" said Maund.

"You can consider it in that light if you wish."

"Very well, I will show you how I despise your threats, I shall refuse the increase you ask for," said Maund.

"That is your final decision?"

"Yes,"

"Then I shall tell Mr. Burrowes all I know."

"You know nothing."

"That remains to be seen," said Hart. "Mr. Burrowes told me a good many things before he died."

"More fool he," said Maund.

Hart took his hat from the table and left the room. Maund saw him pass the window and scowled. He felt very uneasy. Was it possible James Hart knew anything of importance? The supposition was absurd; he tried to dismiss the matter from his mind, but failed utterly.

James Hart had promised to help Neil Burrowes, and since his return from the south, Neil had opened his mind freely to him.

Neil liked the sterling, honest qualities in Hart, and knew his father had trusted him. When he discovered that there was, according to Maund, a debt of fifty thousand pounds on Coombe, James Hart was startled.

At first he thought to tell Neil what he knew, on second consideration he decided it would be better to hold it back until Algar Maund could be crushed effectively.

After his interview with Maund, James Hart put him down as a thorough-paced scoundrel; knowing what the late Mr. Burrowes had told him, he could not think otherwise. His mention of a rise in the price of overtime pay, was a ruse to get at Maund, and place him in a corner. He succeeded; he was certain now what Mr. Burrowes

had told him was true. He judged by the look of alarm in Maund's face.

James Hart was much attached to Neil. He had known him from a lad, and his affection for him was genuine. He hated Maund as much as he loved Neil, and was determined to checkmate the former when the proper time arrived. He knew of Maund's proposal to Beryl, and that he had given her six months in which to decide. He thought it insulting on Maund's part to make such an offer; it still further roused his enmity against the man.

The more Maund thought over the interview, the more uneasy he became. If James Hart had a weapon to use against him, he would use it skilfully. Maund had always dreaded James Hart's interference in business matters, for the man had generally proved stronger than the master. Nothing, however, he was determined, should stand between him and Beryl. His passion for her almost amounted to madness; he had some difficulty in keeping it under control. She was worth running a great risk for, and no James Hart should stand in his way.

How he hated the man. Would it be possible to silence him in case he knew something?

Maund shuddered at the thought; there were plenty of "black legs" who would be willing to "do" for Hart for a consideration.

James Hart was often at the docks late at night, it

would not be difficult—an accidental push and a splash in the water.

“Curse the fellow! He is the bane of my existence. I wish he were out of it. I wish he were dead,” said Maund to himself, then shuddered again at the horrible thought that flitted through his mind.

CHAPTER XVI

JAMES HART DISAPPEARS

It was with no thought of any danger lurking that James Hart went to the docks late one night to see the captain of one of the steamers. The firm of Burrowes owned numerous vessels employed in the trade, and Hart was familiar with most of the skippers and men.

It was dark, about two in the morning, when he left the *Petrel*, bidding good-bye to the captain as he stepped on to the wharf.

He knew his way in the dark, and walked along, whistling softly an old Scottish air.

He was stopped by some large barrels, and stepped almost to the edge of the wharf to avoid them.

“Curious!” he thought. “I did not see them when I came on.”

Crash! A blow on the head from some heavy instrument, and James Hart went over the side, falling into the water with a splash. There was a sound of some one running, then silence.

It was, however, not written that James Hart's hour had come. The watchman heard the splash, also the sound of hurrying feet, guessed what had happened, and, switching on his light, hurried quickly along until he reached the steps, at the foot of which he found a boat. He pushed off, paddling in the direction he heard the noise. The bow struck something; he reached over and caught hold of a man's coat. It was impossible to lift him out of the water, so he held him with one hand while he got a rope, fastened it under his arms, then to the seat of the boat, so that the man's head was above water while he pulled to the steps.

He dragged him out with some difficulty, and by the light of his lantern discovered it was James Hart. The recognition startled him, for Hart was popular on the docks—a real good fellow to the men.

Captain James of the *Petrel* heard peculiar sounds; he had sharp ears, and surmised something was wrong.

"Hart hasn't tumbled over the side, I hope," he muttered.

He reached the steps as the watchman, Jacob Thane, came up in search of assistance.

"Anything the matter, Jacob?" asked James.

"Yes, and it's serious."

"Man fallen in the water?"

"Yes; James Hart."

They hurried down to the steps, and carried Hart on to the wharf.

Captain James felt his heart and pulse. "Thank God he's alive," he said, and proceeded to restore animation.

Fortunately Hart had not been long in the water. When he fell in, the cold drenching revived him; he kept himself afloat until his head swam, when he became faint, and sank.

Restoration was a matter of a few minutes. Hart groaned, and then tried to sit up.

"You're safe on shore, old chap," said Captain James; "but I reckon you've had a narrow squeak. Luckily for you our friend Jacob heard the splash."

They assisted him to his feet, took him on board the *Petrel*, and put him in a bunk, where he fell asleep for half an hour.

He felt better when roused, and remembered what had happened. At once his wits were at work; he connected the outrage with Algar Maund, who was, no doubt, responsible for it.

"Who knows about this?" he asked

"Only me and Jacob," said the captain.

"You can keep silent, Jacob," said James.

"Yes; but aren't you going to find out who hit you on the head? It's an attempt at murder, nothing short of that," said Jacob.

"Let me find out in my own way," said James.

"What's the game?" asked the captain.

"I'm going a trip with you; how long shall you be away?"

"About a month."

"That will suit me."

"I see," said Captain James. "You mean to disappear?"

"That's about it. I can rely on you, Jacob?"

"I'll not say a word until I hear from you," he answered.

"You'd best stay here until we are at sea," said the captain, "then none of my crew can split."

Jacob thought it a strange move, but knew James Hart was a clever man, and must have good reasons for the course he took.

He stood on the wharf, watching the *Petrel* leave, and as she cleared away, said to himself—

"I hope he'll find out the scoundrel when he returns."

"James Hart's missing," said Neil to his sister, when he returned from the works a day or two after the murderous attack.

"Missing; you mean gone away for a change," said Beryl.

"He can't be found; it is feared something has happened. He has many enemies among the rough element, 'the black-legs.'"

"You don't mean he is dead," said Beryl, aghast.

"There's no telling what may have happened. His

movements are uncertain ; but Jacob Thane, the watchman, says he saw him on Leith dock late at night on Monday, but did not see him pass the gates again," said Neil.

"Who told you he was missing?" asked Beryl.

"One of the men, a particular friend of his."

"But it may not be serious. I hope not. I like Hart; he is a genuine, large-hearted man," said Beryl.

Neil waited for a week, and no news was heard of James Hart. He had disappeared in a most mysterious manner; no one had seen him since Jacob Thane met him at the docks.

Jacob had to stand a running fire of questions. A prominent Labour man like Hart could not vanish suddenly without creating a sensation. It was totally unlike him to go away without a word, leaving no trace behind; he was not given to secrecy, although a man who kept his own counsel.

The press took the affair up keenly. Many theories were advanced, the most feasible being that James Hart had either fallen into the water, or been struck down and then pushed in. It was strange Jacob Thane had not seen him pass out of the gates. The police were active, but obtained no clue.

Neil saw Algar Maund about it. "I think we ought to offer a reward," he said.

"Why should we? it is none of our business," was the answer.

"It may be none of our business," said Neil, "but I shall make it mine. James Hart is one of our most respected men; it will be callous to make no move."

"Do as you like," said Maund. "I have no doubt he has cleared out. He's secretary, or treasurer, or something of the kind, for one or two societies, and he's probably got the funds into a mess."

"You know that is not true; he is scrupulously honest," said Neil, hotly.

"I never trust those honest men," said Maund.

Neil was disgusted with Maund's conduct; he saw as little of him as possible. Whenever they met, his dislike for the man increased.

Algar Maund was well pleased at Hart's disappearance, but the mystery hovering over it puzzled him. He knew Hart had fallen into the water, and wondered why the body had not been recovered. It had been suggested to him that it had probably floated out with the ebbing water, but it would have been far more satisfactory to make sure of it.

Of one thing he felt certain, Hart would never trouble him again, and whatever he knew, or pretended to know, about the Coombe estate, was buried in oblivion.

It did not trouble his conscience, such as it was, that James Hart had been done to death at his instigation.

He was not long, however, in finding out that heavy payments have to be made for murderous services

rendered, and he was annoyed with threats which could not be passed over unheeded.

Meanwhile, James Hart was enjoying himself on the *Petrel*, wondering what construction would be put upon his absence from the works. That there would be some stir he knew, but he had not contemplated anything like the sensation created. The sea air revived him, and his head troubled him for a few days, which soon got well. The more he thought the affair out, the greater was his certainty that Algar Maund was at the bottom of the cowardly attack. This being so, if his supposition were correct, it would startle Maund if he put in a sudden reappearance. No doubt Maund thought him dead, but he would show him, when the time came, he was very much alive. He said not a word of his suspicions to Captain James, or any one on the *Petrel*, although questioned about it.

When the time came for the Jubilee Stakes to be run for, Neil and his sister again journeyed south to Crowhurst. It was a relief to Neil to get away from the neighbourhood of Leith. Mrs. Burrowes, having improved considerably in health, had gone to stay with a relative at Bournemouth for several weeks.

Leslie promised to return with them after the Jubilee, and remain to see if Algar Maund would have the audacity to put in an appearance. If he did he would be surprised to learn Beryl had been engaged for nearly six months.

"That will be a shock to him," said Neil, "if he dares to face another abrupt refusal. I'll tell you what, Leslie, I should not be surprised to learn he had a hand in the disappearance of James Hart."

"Surely he's not bad enough for that."

"There's hardly any wickedness I would put past him," answered Neil.

CHAPTER XVII

THE JUBILEE STAKES

BENVOLIO was a hot favourite for the Jubilee, covering money from the continental agencies bringing him to a false price. Despite his penalty, he possessed an undeniable chance. Sun Ray was a wonderfully good horse, and the way Benvolio stuck to him in the City and Suburban, and beat him, was not forgotten.

Over eight stone was, however, a different thing to seven stone six pounds, and Leslie was anxious about the result.

"There's no cause to worry," said the trainer; "he'll run a stone better horse at Kempton than he did at Epsom. It's a good thing Seth is fond of hugging the rails, that's a sharp bend in the Jubilee course."

Benvolio's final gallop, in which he was ridden by Seth

Sutton, showed him at the top of his form. He was even fitter than at Epsom.

"I am glad we have him going in doubles," said Neil, "there would be no chance of getting on now."

There is no more popular race around London than the Jubilee Stakes, and as a rule a good horse wins it. The top weight was Rob Roy, a popular favourite, who had one Jubilee to his credit, and a Hunt Cup at Ascot. As top weights nearly always ran well at Kempton he had plenty of followers.

An enormous crowd gathered on the famous course which looked at its best this bright day in early May. Beryl thought the scene enchanting, and admired the well-dressed crowd on the lawn and in the paddock.

Benvolio was saddled near the railway side, close under the hedge, and it was some time before he was discovered. The favourite, however, cannot long remain unnoticed, and a crowd soon gathered round.

Beryl was talking to Seth, who explained to her that he thought Ben Lade was a little bit too sanguine of success.

"It will be a big thing if he wins such a double," said the jockey.

"He is a great horse," said Beryl.

"That's true, and he'll have to prove it to win. Old Rob Roy's a sticker, and over this distance he'll be bad to beat."

When Benvolio was saddled, Leslie said—

"I am going into the ring ; do you wish to come ?"

"No," said Neil ; " I'll stay with Beryl."

"I'll meet you on the stand," said Leslie, "before the race, after the parade."

When he entered Tattersall's he found his horse was at three to one, Rob Roy being next at a point longer odds, then came Amiable, Phebe, Belgrave, Rushton, David Manxman, Leo, and Fair Lady, all well supported, the outsiders of the eighteen were Pepper Box and Maisy. Rob Roy came in for a cheer as he headed the parade. Twells was on him, and thought his mount had a chance ; after the Epsom race, however, he had a wholesome dread of the favourite.

"It will be curious if Seth just beats me again," he thought. "It's more than likely."

As they cantered to the post Beryl and Neil joined Leslie.

"What do you think of it now?" asked Neil.

"My horse is firm, and to all appearances he'll win," said Leslie.

"It will be a grand double if it comes off."

"Seems almost too good to be true."

"Where are they ?" asked Beryl.

"At the top of the rise, against that white hoarding. Take my glasses, they are powerful," said Leslie.

Beryl looked and saw the horses lined up in front of the machine. As usual, Phebe was busy with her heels, clearing a space round her. Belgrave was

fractious, also David; the starter had some trouble with them.

"They are a long time getting away," she said, as she lowered the glass. As she spoke the bugle sounded from the top of the stand.

"They're away at last," said Neil.

"Has Benvolio got off well?" asked Leslie.

"Can't see him," said Neil.

Beryl handed the glasses to Leslie.

"Bad luck; he's last but two. He must have been left."

It was not Seth's fault. Phebe lashed out, and the jockey pulled Benvolio round just in the nick of time; he avoided a kick, but before the horse's head was facing the tapes again the barrier flew up, and they were off.

This was little short of a catastrophe, and Seth was angry at his bad luck. He did not lose his head, but calmly took in the situation. The leaders seemed a terribly long way ahead, but he reflected a race was never lost until the winning-post was passed.

He did not bustle his mount. Benvolio jumped off at a great pace, and halfway down the straight run, before the bend, was in the middle division, on the inside.

"He's come with a brilliant run," said Leslie; "but he'll be a marvel if he wins."

"Must have lost nearly twenty lengths at the start," said Neil.

"Will he ever make it up?" asked Beryl.

"See! he's going splendidly," said Leslie, giving her the glasses again.

"So he is!" she exclaimed excitedly. "What splendid glasses, I can almost see Seth's face."

"Not a very pleasant expression on it, I expect," said Leslie.

They were nearing the turn into the straight run home, and the jockeys were racing for positions—a wide swing round on the outside made a vast difference to a horse's chance.

"Benvolio's fairly with them," said Neil. "He must have travelled at a great pace."

Seth's hopes rose; either his mount had an extraordinary turn of speed or the pace was slow, which was seldom the case in the Jubilee.

He swept round, hugging the rails, and when fairly in the straight Benvolio was eighth.

Belgrave led by three lengths, and was thus early proclaimed the winner. Rob Roy was lying third, then came Fair Lady and Rushton. Pepper Box was in second place, carrying his light weight well.

Seth saw Benvolio did not gain much. He must make an effort to get on terms, although it was early to come with a rush.

He rode Benvolio hard for a hundred yards, the horse responding gamely, drawing up to the leading division. This seemed to put more heart into him. Benvolio

scented victory. He stretched out in splendid style, and Seth let him go his own pace.

The rousing up had the desired effect. The favourite was rapidly gaining on the leaders.

Thousands of anxious eyes watched the green and white stars. Benvolio carried a pile of money—backers and layers were alike anxious. Pepper Box shot to the front; a roar from the ring greeted the outsider's effort, if he managed to get home they would reap a rich harvest.

Rob Roy carried his nine stone gallantly; there was no flinching; the big brown had the heart of a lion. Twells still hoped his mount might win. Benvolio was now fourth, and was going strongly. Seth knew he was full of running.

Suddenly the beautiful mare Phebe "dropped from the clouds." She passed Benvolio like a meteor, and caught Rob Roy.

Seth was startled. He knew what a tremendous turn of speed the mare had. She was fractious at the post, but once going she never showed temper, or flinched. Phebe's run completely altered the complexion of the race for a moment. Her name was shouted freely, as much as five to one being offered on her winning, as she drew level with Pepper Box.

It has been said that Seth was a great judge of pace, and also of the chops and changes, the chances of a race.

He chuckled as he saw Phebe dash up to the outsider.

"They'll race themselves out in a few strides ; now's my chance," he muttered.

Rob Roy was beaten, and fell back.

"Pull out ! Give me room !" yelled Seth.

Twells recognized the voice. He liked Seth. His mount was beaten, "the rails" was of no advantage to him ; he good-naturedly took Rob Roy on the outside, leaving room for Benvolio to shoot up.

It was a desperate race from this point.

Pepper Box stuck to his work, so did Phebe, but, as Seth anticipated, they were spun out.

Nearer and nearer Benvolio drew, and at last he was close to them.

Phebe swerved to the left, carrying Pepper Box with her, but there was no bumping. This gave Seth his chance. Benvolio came with a rattle and joined the leaders : it was a remarkable feat, after being left so far behind at the start. The trio raced level, and the excitement rose to fever heat.

Seth wondered if his mount would shake the others off. Again he made a last effort, raising his whip and giving Benvolio a cut. The effect was electrical. The horse shot forward with a bound ; had his head in front, then his neck. This advantage seemed to unnerve the riders of Pepper Box and Phebe, both young fellows, clever, but lacking patience and endurance.

A hurricane of cheers broke out when Benvolio got his head in front ; it was renewed again and again, as he increased his lead.

Leslie shouted. Neil joined him. Beryl waved her hand. The people crowding round seethed with excitement, for the favourite was winning.

Seth was elated. He knew Benvolio had accomplished a wonderful feat, and as he passed the judge's box a length to the good, he eased his mount with a sigh of satisfaction, and a cheerful smile on his face.

CHAPTER XVIII

A MEETING AT COOMBE

It was a great victory. Leslie landed his double. He was now in a position to give Beryl such a home as he desired.

Before he left Kempton an offer was made for his horse by a representative of the Russian Government. Ten thousand pounds was the figure, and he thought he ought not to refuse it. Before doing so, however, he consulted Ben Lade and Neil.

"Don't sell," was Ben's advice.

"It seems a pity to refuse ten thousand," said Leslie.

"He's worth more," was Ben's comment. And Neil was of the same opinion.

"What do you say, Beryl?" asked Leslie. "I will abide by your decision."

"Keep him," she answered promptly. "You would be ungrateful to part with him after what he has done."

"That's good advice," said Ben. "He'll win more races, and as a sire he'll be a great success; I'm sure of it, he's bred that way."

The offer was refused, and a rise of another couple of thousand did not tempt Leslie to part with him.

A day or two later they travelled to Coombe to await developments, and ascertain what Algar Maund would do when Beryl finally told him to go about his business.

Maund had no intention of delaying his call. Punctually to the day he wrote asking Beryl if she would receive him.

At first she felt inclined to send no reply; but, acting on Neil's advice, did so.

"I shall be with you when he calls," said Neil, "so will Leslie. You need not be alarmed."

Maund came to Coombe brimful of confidence. If she refused him he must play his trump card and win. He had the document which gave him a first charge on the estate for the sum of fifty thousand pounds.

"This will settle it," he said, as he tapped his pocket.

When Maund was shown into the room, he was surprised to see Neil and Leslie present with Beryl. They showed no inclination to leave.

"I wish to speak to Miss Burrowes alone," said Maund.

"That you cannot do," said Neil.

"At least Mr. Woodsdale will leave?"

"No."

"It is a family matter. He has no interest in it."

"You will find he has," said Neil.

"It is outrageous," said Maund, angrily. "I came here with Miss Burrowes's permission. What I have to say to her is for her ear alone."

No one spoke. "Are they here with your sanction?" asked Maund, looking at her.

"Yes."

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked.

"Oh dear, no," said Beryl, laughing; "but I prefer to have witnesses. You threatened me before."

"We know why you are here," said Neil. "Give him his answer, Beryl."

"I think he knows what it is. I refuse his offer, as I did before."

An ugly smile crossed Algar Maund's face. She had not even waited for him to put the question.

"You refuse to marry me?" he said.

"Decidedly I do. I have some information which may interest you. I am engaged," said Beryl.

Maund glared at her. To be flouted in this manner was more than he could stand.

"Engaged!" he said, in a loud voice. "May I ask who is the fortunate man?"

"I am," said Leslie. "Won't you congratulate me?"

"You'll find it is not a matter for congratulation," said Maund, savagely. "When did this silly engagement take place?"

"The night I met you in the woods," said Beryl.

This aggravated him still more. She had accepted Leslie Woodsdale immediately after leaving him.

"So be it," he said dramatically, raising a smile from the others. "My turn comes now," he continued, drawing the document from his breast coat-pocket. "You see the signatures?" he said, as he held it towards Neil.

"My father's, your own, and two witnesses."

"Quite correct. Would you like to hear the contents?"

"As you please," said Neil.

It was not a long document. Algar Maund read it slowly, uttering the words deliberately, with evident pleasure.

It was a plain statement, easily understandable, and gave, as indicated, a charge on the Coombe estate for fifty thousand pounds to Algar Maund in consideration for that amount lent.

"What do you think of it?" asked Maund, expecting to see consternation on their faces.

He was disappointed. Beryl turned pale; but Neil seemed quite unconcerned, so did Leslie.

"It seems in perfect order," said Neil.

"You'll find it is."

"I can repay the money if you prove your claim," said Neil, coolly.

"Prove it! this proves it up to the hilt," said Maund, tapping the paper.

"That remains to be seen. Of course, I dispute it," said Neil.

"On what grounds?"

"That the money was repaid before my father's death."

"You insinuate I am trying to defraud you," roared Maund.

"It amounts to that."

"Where is the discharge? Have you any proof to show the money was repaid?"

"That is my business. You must prove your claim."

"You will go to court over it?"

"Most decidedly I shall."

Maund laughed harshly as he said, "You have no chance of disputing this; it is signed and witnessed."

"Nevertheless I shall dispute it, because I believe you are concealing the truth," said Neil.

"If Miss Burrowes will reconsider her decision I will be generous," said Maund.

"Indeed!" answered Neil, with a look at Beryl.

"How far will you go? I should like to catch you in a generous mood; it will be a new *rôle* for you to appear in."

"I will hand you this document and forgive the debt—discharge it; I will retire from the business and give you my share. I will settle a handsome fortune on your sister; she shall have every comfort money can buy," he said.

"What do you say, Beryl?" asked Neil.

"That I will not sell myself to him at any price," she answered.

"Good," said Leslie.

Maund's face went livid, his hands clenched; he seemed like a man about to have a fit. Beryl thought him a pitiable object, but could not feel sorry for him.

"I shall take proceedings at once," said Maund. "Under this document I have power to put men in possession."

"You will find you have not," said Neil. "Your claim is disputed."

"You have no grounds to go upon."

"On the contrary, I have excellent grounds. I say my father repaid the money; I also say you will be fortunate if you escape a criminal prosecution," said Neil.

Maund laughed, an ugly laugh, as he said, "Criminal prosecution, bah! You cannot frighten me."

"You'd cut a nice figure in the dock," said Leslie.

"You have nothing to do with this affair," said Maund.

"As I am to marry Miss Burrowes, I differ from you," said Leslie. "I have a great interest in it."

"Afraid she will not have as much money as you expected," sneered Maund.

"She would be as dear to me if she had not a penny," he replied; "but I have no desire to see her robbed by a fellow like you."

"Be careful what you say?" said Maund, in a passion.

Soon after Algar Maund left for Coombe the steamer *Petrel* came into Leith docks. James Hart enjoyed the trip thoroughly. His absence could be easily explained at the proper time. Great was the astonishment of numerous men on the wharf when they saw Hart walking past as though nothing had happened.

"Thought you were dead, Jim; they've been hunting for you everywhere. A nice sensation you've caused, and here you turn up safe and sound! Where have you been?"

"To sea on the *Petrel*," answered Hart, smiling.

"Well, I'm blest!" said his questioner. "You might have left your address behind."

"Had no time," said Hart. "I came to a sudden decision when I went on board to see Captain James."

"Well, we're glad to see him back, aren't we, mates?" said the spokesman. And a rousing cheer was the response.

The news spread quickly that James Hart was alive and well; it reached the works before he arrived. He met with a great reception; had to receive a volley of questions, all of which he answered good-humouredly.

"Where's Mr. Maund?" he asked an astonished clerk, who gazed at him in amazement.

"Thought you were dead, Jim," he said.

"Don't look much like it, do I?" he asked.

"Very much alive, I should say. There's been a rare fuss about you; we thought you'd been done for by some of those 'blacklegs.' They've no love for you."

"Never mind that. Where's Mr. Maund?"

"Gone to Coombe Hall."

James Hart started. Gone to Coombe! Then his mission was to force Miss Burrowes into a hateful marriage. It was a lucky chance the *Petrol* had arrived. He hurried out of the office, the clerk gazing after him bewildered.

"What the deuce is up?" he said to himself. "Is he going to disappear again? I guess old Maund will be sorry to see him back. I've heard him say, more than once, it was 'a blessing Jim Hart had disappeared.'"

CHAPTER XIX

MAUND DEFEATED

JAMES HART wished to surprise Maund. He went to the back of the house and asked to see Neil. The servant recognized him, and was too astonished to speak.

Jim smiled as he said, "I'm alive, Jane; it's no ghost. Tell Mr. Neil quietly some one wants to see him for a moment on business of the utmost importance. Don't mention who it is; say he would not give his name."

Jane tapped at the door. Neil opened it. She beckoned him outside.

"There's some one wishes to see you on very important business, sir," she said.

"Who is it?"

"He told me not to give his name."

"I'll be back in a minute," said Neil, looking into the room.

When he saw James Hart he could not conceal his astonishment.

"Wherever did you spring from? I am glad to see you." He shook him heartily by the hand.

Hart explained in a few words what had happened; then said—

"I heard Maund was here. I know why. I can put a spoke in his wheel. He'll be surprised to see me."

"We were disputing his claim to the Coombe estate," said Neil.

"Call me in a few minutes after you return," said Jim.

Neil promised, and went back to the room.

Maund was preparing to go. His face betrayed the storm raging within.

"Going?" said Neil.

"Yes."

"Better wait a few minutes. I want to introduce you to some one who is anxious to see you."

"See me—here!" exclaimed Maund, wondering who it could be.

Neil called out at the door, "Bring the gentleman in, Jane!"

James Hart walked straight up to Algar Maund. "Glad to see you, again," he said. "You didn't expect to see me." He watched Maund closely.

To say that Algar Maund was astonished, dumfounded, only feebly expresses the state of abject consternation, terror, he was in.

He turned pale as death, all the blood left his face. He placed his hands on the back of a chair to steady himself. He stared at Jim Hart as though he could not believe the evidence of his senses. A trembling seized him; he shook like a leaf, his knees knocked together; he sank, an inert mass, into a chair behind him,

his head falling forward on his breast, his hands clenched, a more miserable, cowardly object it would be difficult to imagine.

"He was responsible for the attack," thought Jim. "His condition proves it. No doubt he thought me safely out of the way."

Slowly Maund raised his eyes, and as he looked at Hart a convulsive shudder shook his body.

"You don't appear to be glad to see me," said Jim; "and yet you ought to be."

"Why?" asked Maund, feebly. "You are no friend of mine."

"No doubt you fancied I was dead."

"We all did."

"You had good reason for thinking I was put out of the way," said Jim.

Beryl and Leslie looked on too amazed to speak. Hart's dramatic reappearance almost took their breath away.

"I knew you had mysteriously disappeared," said Maund, recovering somewhat. He wondered how much Hart knew.

"It's lucky for you I'm here, or you would have been little better than a murderer," said Hart.

They all started. What did this mean?

Maund collapsed again. Hart spoke confidently. He must know something.

"You are the instigator of the cowardly attack on me,"

said Hart. "Don't deny it. Your confusion proves it. You are frightened ; and well you may be."

"I had no hand in it," said Maund.

"In what?" asked Hart. "The assault, or attack, or whatever you call it? Then you are aware I was attacked?"

"You said so."

"The man who plans murder is a worse criminal than the hired wretch who does his bidding. You are responsible for the outrage. Had it not been for Jacob Thane you would have been guilty of my death. I was struck on the head, pushed into the water, left to drown, and by a man hired by you," said Hart, sure of his ground, for there was guilt in every feature of Maund's face. "Don't deny it," said Hart, as Maund was about to speak. "I know all about it."

"I am innocent," said Maund, in a low voice.

"Guilty," said Neil. "You are self-convicted. Your abject terror proves the truth of Hart's assertion. You are in our hands—at our mercy. Shall I detain him until the police are sent for?"

At the word police, Algar Maund's remnant of courage deserted him. His one object was to get away safely, no matter at what cost.

"It's a conspiracy," he muttered. "You have no evidence."

"The best," said Jim. "I can lay my hands on the man who did your bidding."

Again terror held the wretched man in its grip. He glared round like a hunted criminal.

"Knowing what I do, I hold you in the hollow of my hand," said Jim. "You are here to try and extort a promise of marriage from Miss Burrowes."

"That is so," said Beryl.

"You have produced that paper to prove you have a claim on Coombe estates for fifty thousand pounds. It is a lie, a swindle. You have no such claim. The money was repaid before Mr. Burrowes died."

Maund groaned.

"How do you know this?" asked Neil, excitedly.

"Your father told me he had repaid him. Why he should have honoured me with his confidence I don't know."

"He trusted you, Jim. He had great faith in you," said Neil.

"You are a swindler and a would-be murderer, Algar Maund, and you are entirely at our mercy. What are you going to do?" asked Jim Hart.

"He is right; what are you going to do?" said Neil.

Maund moaned; then, suddenly starting up, said hurriedly—

"I deny the accusations. I shall claim my right. I defy this man to prove anything against me;" and he pointed to Hart.

"I think it will be best to send for the police," said Jim.

Maund looked round. There was no escape; he was in the midst of enemies he had wronged, they would be merciless. In vain he racked his brain for some means of overcoming them; there was none. He instinctively felt that James Hart knew all about the attack on the wharf, and how he had instigated it. His confederate must have told the truth to screen himself, and to secure his safety as the price of turning traitor.

"What are you prepared to do to save yourself?" asked Hart.

They all felt the man who had suffered at Maund's hands had the right to dictate terms.

"I deny everything; but I am forced to submit," muttered Maund.

"Deny it if you wish," said Hart. "It matters little so long as you do as I desire. You mention nothing. I must assist you."

"Go on," moaned Maund.

"In the first place hand that document over to Mr. Burrowes," said Hart. "The money was repaid, as you well know."

Maund nodded his head. "Take it. Rob me of my just claim," he said.

Hart, without a moment's hesitation, tore the paper into many pieces; then he handed the fragments to Neil, who thanked him with a look.

"Anything else?" said Maund, feebly.

"Yes. For the injury you have done me I desire one

thing—a full confession,” said Hart, “in the presence of these witnesses. You can then go scot-free so far as I am concerned.”

“You are generous,” said Leslie.

“I can afford it; he is in my power.”

“There is nothing to confess,” said Maund.

“Very well, then; you must take the consequences. I shall at once report what I know to the police.”

“What must I tell you?”

“Tell the truth,” said Hart.

Maund then made a rambling statement, in which he said he had no intention of injuring Hart; he merely wished to show him his meddlesome interference in the men’s affairs was likely to prove dangerous. “I was desirous of intimidating you, that was all. I am glad you have come back,” he said.

“You confess you were the instigator of the attack upon me?” asked Hart.

“Yes; I did it in the interests of the firm,” said Maund.

Hart smiled as he said, “You can ease your conscience that way if you wish. There is another thing you must do.”

“What is it?”

“Retire from the firm. You have an ample fortune.”

“I must be paid out—have my share,” said Maund.

“Not a penny. You have plundered sufficiently already,” answered Hart.

"This is barefaced robbery," said Maund.

"Your claim upon Coombe came under that definition," said Hart.

"I must have time to consider the matter."

"Not a minute. Say yes or no. Are you willing? Remember the consequences if you refuse."

"I am forced to consent. I will see to it at the office," said Maund.

"You will sign the necessary documents before leaving the house," said Hart.

"Impossible! It will require to be legally done.

"Mr. Burrowes will send his motor to Edinburgh for his solicitor; there will be no difficulty about the matter. All you have to do is to remain here until he arrives, and until the necessary documents are drawn up. Sign in the presence of witnesses, and then you are free to depart," said James Hart.

CHAPTER XX

ROBBERY WITH VIOLENCE

ALGAR MAUND was practically a prisoner at Coombe. His schemes had failed disastrously; there was no hope of recovery.

In an hour John Ferguson, the solicitor, arrived.

Everything was explained to him in Maund's presence. He was greatly surprised; he had been accustomed to regard Maund as the bulwark of the firm.

"You are placed in an awkward predicament," he said. "I suppose you understand what you are about to do?"

"I am to be robbed of fifty thousand pounds and my share in the firm."

"You have no claim," said Ferguson.

"I had; the document has been destroyed."

"Who destroyed it?"

"James Hart."

"With your full permission," said Hart.

"I was driven to it."

"Shall I draw up the necessary documents," said Mr. Ferguson.

Maund made no reply.

"Please do so," said Neil. "Come into my study."

They retired, Beryl accompanying them, leaving Leslie with Maund. It took a considerable time to draw the documents: when they were ready Mr. Ferguson presented them to Maund.

"Read them," he said.

"I prefer your doing so."

Mr. Ferguson read them. Maund put his signature to them in a shaky hand; Leslie and James Hart acted as witnesses.

"Now you may go," said Neil. "You are fortunate to escape so easily."

Maund rose and walked slowly to the door.

"You must not go to the works; I will have all your belongings sent to you," said Neil.

"Very well," said Maund.

"This is a strange business," said Mr. Ferguson; "the man must be a thorough-paced rogue."

Maund had no intention of following Neil's instructions. He walked to Coombe station and returned to Edinburgh. He remained in the city until night, then went to Leith. The works were closed, but he had no difficulty in entering his office. He opened the safes, sorted out some papers, and took a large bundle of notes and gold, which he stuffed into his pockets. He did not see a face peering in at the window.

A rough looking, powerful man had seen Maund enter the yard, watched him enter his office, then crept in after him unseen by the watchman.

His eyes glittered as he saw the gold and notes Maund stuffed into his pockets.

"I must have them," he muttered.

The door was unlocked; he opened it noiselessly, and stepped quickly into the room. Maund looked round as he heard the key turned in the lock, and found himself face to face with Abe Dougal, the man he had set on to make away with Hart.

"What have you come for?" asked Maund, in a trembling voice.

"Money."

"Curse you," said Maund, savagely. "You have given me away; James Hart knows all."

"James Hart!" exclaimed Abe. "He's dead."

"He is at Coombe. You know he is alive. You gave him the information."

"That's a lie. I did not know he was alive."

"You mean to say you did not split!" exclaimed Maund.

"No, I did not; how could I when I thought him dead?" said Abe.

Something told Maund the man spoke the truth; this being so, he had been trapped. Hart's accusation was founded on mere guess-work; he had been swindled, deluded, forced to sign the documents. He raved, walking about the room like a madman. Then it occurred to him that, Hart being alive, he had nothing to fear from the man.

"So you've come for money?" he said.

"Yes."

"You'll not get a penny. Hart is alive."

"All the better; I'll tell him who put me on to do for him."

Maund laughed, as he said, "He knows; I told him. You had better make yourself scarce."

"You told him!" exclaimed Abe.

"Yes. I am safe; but you will be caught."

Abe laughed, as he said, "That won't do. You fancy

yourself clever. If I stand in the dock you will be with me."

"Shall I? You'll find out you'll be alone."

"Settle with me, and I'll go," said Abe.

"You have been well paid for work you failed to accomplish."

"I don't think so."

"Get out of this," said Maund.

"Hand over that money you have on you," said Abe, threateningly, advancing.

Maund went quickly round to the other side of the table, slipped open a drawer, and took out a revolver; but before he could level it, Abe Dougal had him by the throat, wrenched it from his hand, and struck him a violent blow on the head with the butt. Maund sank on to the table with a groan. Abe struck him again; then, as the wretched man still showed signs of consciousness, he hit him another terrible blow.

Maund was still; Abe Dougal turned him over, laid him on the floor, searched him, and abstracted the notes and gold.

Hurriedly he left the place without being seen.

Next morning Maund was found lying on the floor of his office in a half-conscious condition.

Neil Burrowes was sent for, and arrived quickly. The safes were open, Maund had evidently been assaulted and robbed.

He was removed to the hospital. In a few days the

doctors said he would be a helpless, but harmless, imbecile for the rest of his life.

Neil had him taken to a private asylum where he could have every attention, and soon discovered there was an ample fortune at Maund's disposal which would keep him in comfort.

"He may possibly recover his reason," said the physician who kept the home, and who was a specialist in such cases.

"Do your best for him," said Neil; "spare no expense."

James Hart said it was a just punishment; still he was human, and hoped Maund would recover his reason.

Neil gave Hart a share in the works, an action greatly applauded by the hundreds of men employed.

"You have a representative of your own in the firm," said Neil, when he addressed them; "there will, I trust, be no difficulties in the future that cannot be easily settled."

Leslie and Beryl were to be married in the autumn. Mrs. Burrowes was pleased with the match. Neil had given her an account of the doings at Coombe during her absence.

"I always told your father he placed too much trust in that man," she said.

Leslie returned to Crowhurst, where Benvolio was still in work, with a view to the Duke of York Stakes at Kempton in the autumn.

Neil's trainer died, and he sent Stirling, Prodigal and Signet to Bën Lade.

The trainer was greatly impressed with Stirling. .

"I'll give him a gallop with Benvolio and a couple more," he said.

This was done, Neil's horse making such a brilliant show against the pick of the stable that Ben said—

"He'll win the Cambridgeshire. That's the race for him."

"Big game to fly at," wrote Neil, when he heard Ben's opinion ; and so thought Leslie.

The marriage took place at Coombe Church. Leslie and his bride went for a month's honeymoon tour in the south of England.

Beryl insisted upon residing at Crowhurst.

"I love the place," she said. "And as I am so fond of horses, I shall have plenty to occupy my leisure."

Leslie was only too pleased to fall in with her wishes, although he said Crowhurst was a poor exchange for Coombe Park.

"Is it?" said Beryl, smiling. "I don't think so. You see, Mr. Leslie Woodsdale lives at Crowhurst. That is the great attraction."

Mrs. Bunting was charmed with Beryl, who told her she must undertake the management of the household, as had been her custom.

Ben Lade said, "There'll be no room for us here, 'Liza."

"There'll be room for me," she retorted. "Mrs. Woodsdale has asked me to remain."

"Much better come and keep house for me," said Ben. "It's a chance for you, my girl, and if you suit me I might go a step further and make you Mrs. Lade."

"I'm not going on approbation, thank you," said Eliza, indignantly.

Ben chuckled as he said, "Most choice goods are sent on approval nowadays."

"How dare you?" she snapped. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I'm not, not a little bit," said Ben.

"You're an old reprobate."

"Better have an ancient sinner than a young one," said Ben.

"I'll have neither. I know when I'm well off."

"So do I, 'Liza; and even your buxom charms would not tempt me to abandon single blessedness," said Ben.

Leslie built a picturesque cottage for Ben Lade, who moved into it as soon as possible."

"Why don't you marry?" asked Leslie.

"'Liza Bunting won't have me," answered Ben, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"I'll ask my wife to talk it over with her," said Leslie. "She may induce her to change her mind and have compassion on you."

"Please don't," said Ben. "'Liza's all very well—at a distance. She's a good sort, but she's domineering."

Leslie told Beryl, and Mrs. Bunting came in for a good deal of chaffing.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PICK OF THE STABLE

KEMPTON again; the first week in October; Benvolio once more favourite, this time for the Duke of York Stakes. Leslie's crack was top weight, with nine stone, a heavy impost; but Ben Lade considered him equal to carrying it successfully. The pick of the stable was at his best, bang at the top of his form. After his success in the Jubilee he had been cased in his work. The spell did him good. Stirling was in the Cambridgeshire with seven stone ten pounds, and as he had run a great trial with Benvolio, at a difference of seven pounds only, the result of the Duke of York Stakes was looked forward to with great interest.

The field was quite up to the average, some good horses were down to run, twenty in all. Benvolio was

all the rage. He was backed for a pile of money, and touched three to one.

Some of his old opponents were in the race, among them Phebe and Demon. Other fair-class horses were Carton, Red Lamp, Playful, and Boycott.

Neil came to Crowhurst a few days before the races, bringing James Hart with him. Since the defeating of Algar Maund, Neil had treated Hart as a friend, and an equal, which he much appreciated.

Hart did not frequent races as a rule, although he generally went to the Edinburgh meetings.

"I have worked too hard for my money," he said, "to throw it away in speculation."

"You must come to Kempton," said Neil, "and have a trifle on Benvolio."

Hart was more interested in the crowd than the racing; he was a good judge of faces, and there was plenty of variety.

A great cheer greeted Benvolio's appearance on the course. The horse had won the City and Suburban, and Jubilee Stakes; it was confidently expected he would pull off the treble.

He looked magnificent as he led the parade, his old pilot, Seth Sutton, sitting, smiling and confident, in the saddle.

"He's good enough to carry his weight and win," was the general opinion.

Phebe seemed to have cooled down since her last

appearance, and behaved well at the post. There was very little delay, the lot were sent off a few minutes after time.

Carton went to the front, Seth noticed the pace was not so fast as that set in the Jubilee. He steadied Benvolio, got him in a good position on the rails, and had no intention of making a forward movement until they were round the bend. The field was well together as they approached the curve, Carton still leading, with Red Lamp, Playful, Phebe, Demon, and Boycott next. Then came Benvolio, and Hard Hit. In the straight Carton gave way, and Phebe took up the running from Red Lamp and Demon, who had come very fast from the turn. All eyes were watching the green and white stars, eager to see the favourite make his run. Seth sat still, still riding confidently, a smile on his face; he was almost certain of victory.

"I'll let 'em see," he muttered; "he'll smother 'em at the finish."

"He ought to come out now," said Leslie; and no sooner had he spoken, than Benvolio made his run. The effect was electrical. The top weight came through his field in gallant style, passing horse after horse, until he reached Red Lamp.

A great cheer greeted this mighty effort. It brought the colour to Beryl's cheek; even James Hart did not hear it unmoved.

Phebe was the danger; but Seth had her measure. He

knew what Benvolio could do. For a few seconds he let the mare hold the lead, then took Benvolio to the front amid a perfect storm of applause. It was a glorious sight—the favourite, the top weight, the gallant son of Ben Battle, winning in splendid style. There was no mistake about it, no suspense; Benvolio had the race in hand from the distance, and won by four lengths from Phebe.

The scene was not easily forgotten. The crowd went wild with excitement, and the cheering continued for several minutes. It broke out again when "All right" was called, also in the paddock, when the winner, Leslie, and Beryl appeared. A more popular victory had never been at Kempton.

Leslie was proud of his horse. Beryl produced a lump of sugar, giving Benvolio the titbit, her face radiant with pleasure.

"You are glad you refused the big bid for him in May?" she said.

"I am. It was owing to you I kept him."

"And Ben," she said.

"You put him in?" said Leslie, smiling.

"He deserves it."

Leslie won a good stake, so did all his friends. He did not fail to tell them to put some of their winnings on Stirling in the Cambridgeshire.

Three weeks later the scene changed to Newmarket. This time it was Neil's horse was the attraction.

Ben Lade would not hear of defeat, on the strength of what Stirling could do with Benvolio.

It certainly looked good business to back him, but Seth was not over-sanguine; he did not like the way the horse galloped sometimes.

"Fancy he's a bit of a shirker," he said to Ben.

"I have seen nothing of it," said the trainer. "Don't ride him with that idea in your head."

Phebe was in the race, and well backed. Her connections were sanguine she would atone for two or three defeats. Her second to Benvolio in the Duke of York Stakes was considered good enough to go upon.

Stirling was at a hundred to eight, Phebe at seven to one. The favourite was a pitched-in five-year-old, named North Sea, at four to one.

Neither Neil nor Leslie had heavy investments on Stirling; they were not over sanguine after what Seth said about shirking.

A big field, twenty-four starters, the handicap was on the whole considered good, the blot being North Sea with six stone ten pounds.

Beryl was not present. Her mother being in ill-health, she had gone to Coombe to see her.

When the start took place, Legerdemain rushed to the front, leading the field along at a tremendous pace for four furlongs. This put several horses out of the race.

Seth had some difficulty in keeping Stirling in his

place; the horse could not go the pace. He managed to gain ground as they came along the wide stretch—the famous stretch over which so many sensational races have been decided.

The tartan jacket became prominent before the rise at the finish, but Neil thought there was little hope of winning.

As they breasted the hill, the favourite shot out, and, assisted by his light weight, led by a couple of lengths.

“It’s all over,” said Leslie.

“I’m afraid it is, so far as we are concerned; but look at Phebe,” said Neil.

The mare was going well. There was still a chance for her.

Seton urged Stirling on. He had small hopes of winning, but meant to try for the place for which the horse had been backed.

The excitement rose when Phebe gradually gained on North Sea; it increased as she drew level, and a desperate battle home ensued.

The mare stuck to her work. She would not be denied, and eventually won by half a length from North Sea, with Stirling, three lengths away, third.

Neil was quite satisfied with the way his horse ran; but Ben Lade was disappointed, and said—

“It is not within ten pounds of the form he showed with Benvolio.”

Before the following autumn there was a new arrival at Crowhurst. Beryl's baby boy was a "perfect beauty"; so said Mrs. Bunting.

"You ought to be a judge," said Ben; "but it seems to me babies are all alike."

"You'd better not let Mrs. Woodsdale hear you say so," she said.

At Coombe Hall a hearty welcome was extended to the little stranger, who bore his father's name. Mrs. Burrowes seemed to get renewed life as she nursed her grandson.

One morning Neil said, "I have had a letter from the private asylum where Algar Maund is staying. He is dying, and wishes to see me."

"Of course you will go?" said Beryl.

"Yes; I think I ought to go," he said.

Algar Maund knew him. Neil was shocked to see the change in the man.

Looking at him entreatingly, Maund said in a low voice—

"I hope you will forgive me for the trouble I caused you."

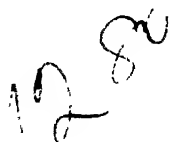
"Willingly," said Neil, and took his hand, pressing it gently.

"I have made some amends. I have left all I possess to Beryl. Please ask her to accept it."

Neil promised. Maund seemed pacified, and at ease. He died the same night.

Leslie decided to keep Benvolio in training for another year, as he was perfectly sound.

In the spring Ben Lade prophesied that he would again win the Jubilee Stakes with "the pick of the stable."



THE END

